

TIME FOR AUTONOMY:  
SUBJECTIVITY, SOCIALITY AND TIME WITH SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR  
WELL-BEING

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on critical interpretive medical anthropology (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1996) and Biehl *et al.*'s (2007) work on subjectivity, this thesis investigates the effects of social media and their entanglement in surveillance capitalism on the perceptions and embodiments of well-being in consumer culture. To conduct this research, I used narrative ethnographic methods, including person-centered interviews and audio diaries performed by participants themselves. This research finds that social media impact conceptions of well-being in a cyclic and two-pronged manner. First, social networking sites (SNSs) and apps are vigorously designed to coerce, manipulate and commodify user attention, which reifies users into those with more, or less, autonomy. Second, while social media are considered “useful tools” for manifesting sociality and managing time and resources, social media also utilize vulnerable intersubjectivities to encourage compulsive use, isolate the individual and consequently lower individual autonomy. Not only does this initiate habitual behaviours that oppose participants’ understandings of well-being, but these recursive patterns are beginning to shift definitions of well-being to justify detrimental social media use. This research contributes to a growing body of work that examines the efficacy of social media as well as the importance of autonomy for well-being in surveillance capitalism. While highlighting the dearth of research conducted on social media and well-being in medical anthropology as of yet, this study also emphasizes the importance of developing medical anthropological research on intersubjectivities of efficiency, the digitization of subjectivities in healthcare and the enactment and spread of well-being concepts at various levels of globality.

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## DEDICATION

For the individuals who volunteered to participate in this study, whose comings of age tell the story of a generation.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology.

- Martin Heidegger (1977, 4)

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the role that information and communication technologies (ICTs) play in the construction and embodiment of well-being for Millennials. As individuals who have come of age with digital as well as ‘smart’ technologies and social media, Millennials face a massive, global paradigm shift. In this thesis, I conduct 13 one-hour-long person-centered interviews and three audio diaries with 13 Millennial participants. I rely on a critical medical anthropological approach and narrative analyses to determine how rapid embodied and cultural change brought on by social media and surveillance capitalism are shifting conceptions of well-being in consumer culture.

The production and use of ICTs is steadily evolving and continuously shaping the lives of individuals in every part of the world. Over the last two decades, the World Wide Web – the physical system which supports the transfer of information across the Internet – has seen considerable changes. The Web is considered by many to be in its 3.0 stage (Watts 2014). Web 1.0 of the mid-late 1990s was characterized by its document-sharing capabilities and E-commerce (Cabage and Zhang 2013). Around 2004, Web 2.0 could be identified by its social platforms and information- or ‘content’ sharing between users (Cabage and Zhang 2013). Within the past decade, Web 3.0 has been increasingly defined by the interactivity between its users and the website interfaces themselves (Watts 2014). In her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Shoshana Zuboff (2019) traces from the roots of capitalism the rise of technological superpowers like Google and Facebook and outlines what she calls surveillance capitalism. Zuboff (2019) defines this as the global economy, born in America, devoted to the surveillance and prediction of behaviours of individuals now, soon and later (Zuboff 2019).

When Google made a shift to sell its ‘Search’ technologies to the advertising economy in the economic crisis of the early 2000s, the services and features provided by numerous ICTs became merely the façade of a finely tuned system of extraction. For a decade now, social networking sites (SNSs) and other social media have gathered personal browsing information, or ‘data’, from users, which inform computational systems, or ‘algorithms’. Algorithms not only inform what content is displayed and offered to the user on SNSs but on third-party sites as well, which creates for the user “a personalised world of news and entertainment” (Watts 2014, 171).

Advertising in its myriad forms is a large portion of the content that is personalized for internet users. With Google’s advertising software permeating nearly all corners of the Internet, the same algorithms that predict who would like to see which products and when serve to ‘mine’ from users their personal and psychological details. Zuboff (2019) calls this the mining of behavioural surplus. It is the fixed attention of individuals on social media and their predictive patterns of use that are highly sought after. The more that subjectivities are enacted over internet services and increasingly more time is spent there, the more opportunity is created for Google’s widespread surveillance software to ‘learn’ from this information and commodify, buy and sell subjectivities that would otherwise exist outside of global markets. Most ICTs are highly incentivized to promote user dependency and, furthermore, to do so knowingly without user-consent. Therefore, the massively profitable economy of surveillance capitalism operates under the premise of lowering user autonomy and keeping the innerworkings of this economy inaccessible to all but a select few individuals. The once-valued reciprocity between consumer and producer, supply and demand, has crumbled (Zuoff 2019). With these massive structural shifts underway, it is of utmost importance to critically study how these changes are being internalized and the extent to which well-being in consumer culture is in flux.

Moral panic has surrounded ICTs for nearly a decade with claims in popular media sources that social media makes children and youth more prone to distraction, superficiality and learning disability (Carr 2010; Cowen-Jenson and Goodison 2009; Derbyshire 2009; Zaki 2011). More recently, ICTs have caused

concern both in academia and popular discourse alike over their effects on memory, agency, life-satisfaction and other intersubjectivities (Burkeman 2016; Case 2016; Stokes 2016; Veissière and Stendel 2018). Stokes (2016, 42) writes, “there is a deeper worry: that in recording and sharing so much of our lives we’re neglecting to actually live them.” The visual abundance of information that one sees on screen and how it makes its way to specific users is certainly neither a random nor neutral process (Courtney 2014; Heidegger 1977; Hirsh *et al.* 2012; Thayne 2012). Promotional content can be anything from local ads to friends’ interests and political campaign messages. Where content ends up online is guided by probability formulas, which, in turn, are increasingly informed by the latest advances in the fields of psychology, neuroscience and behavioural studies (Watts 2014).

Algorithms select individuals whose demographic data, contact information, date of birth, friend lists and more, specifically equate to a higher probability that they will be interested in the content. Some web-browsers now equip users with the ability to ‘choose’ whether their data are used for targeted advertising. For example, Google informs users in its “personal info & privacy” section, that enabling “personalised ads” will “make the ads that you see more useful to you.” However, in the wake of such scandals as that of Cambridge Analytica and Facebook’s election interference and the growing awareness of their psychographic – as opposed to demographic – data collection methods, the public is slowly awakening to the magnitude and scope of power to which their personal internet use contributes. In this thesis I ask, amidst polarized social perceptions of ICTs and the world of digital coding that is largely inaccessible for most users: what is it like to navigate these technologies daily – socially, emotionally and critically – as the generation coming of age in Web 3.0?

Beginning with the rise of television media, consumer culture in North America is criticized as having weakened the power of the institution of the family, sparking the rise of hyper-individualization in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism (Lasch 1979). Furthermore, Lasch (1979) and O’Neill (1991) agree that the development of television media contributes to a diminished sense of cultural historicity, raising a generation that values ‘living in the moment,’ an increasing horizontality, as opposed to the verticality of

planning for the future and looking to the past for assistance. Following in this trajectory, today's youth are not only faced with the superficiality of screen-culture, but the experience of a multiplicity of levels and scales on which action and narrative can unfold (Choudhury and McKinney 2013; Ryan 2001; Wilson and Peterson 2002). Pitts-Taylor (2010, 638) writes, "singular subjects and truths, linear history, hegemonic dominance of singular ideas, are dying. Newly emergent is 'the possibility of a new plurality of truths and futures: beings with an awareness of our/their multi-directional itinerary' (Rotman 2000, 77-78)." Symbolic interactionist and semiotic theories have long informed us that identity is structured out of a history of encounters with others (Holstein and Gubrium 2003). As SNSs have drastically changed the ways in which people interact, it follows that selfhood, well-being, narrative and other embodied cultural forms too have changed (Hayles 1993; Holstein and Gubrium 2003; Ryan 2001). While surveillance capitalism continues to isolate the individual, there is increasing emphasis in popular discourse on togetherness, group politics and acceptance. The normalization of social media arguably constitutes part of a larger movement toward selfhood becoming unfixed, decentered and perhaps even atomized (Choudhury and McKinney; Pitts-Taylor 2010; Rotman 2000).

Presently, there is a great need for anthropologists to critically investigate the role of ICTs in consumerism, with some claiming that this represents part of an ontological turn for anthropology (Holbraad and Petersen 2017). Firstly, the state of consumerism is powerful and undoubtedly impacts the entire world through globalization and the anthropogenic climate change resulting from such mass consumption. There is much scholarly research here from many fields, yet more effort is needed from medical anthropology to reflexively problematize well-being with surveillance capitalism and consumer culture, which, too, will benefit the vulnerable and indigenous cultures onto which it spreads. Secondly, a rapidly changing technological landscape warrants critical anthropological monitoring. Finally, there must be more care taken to safeguard human subjectivities, which are increasingly preyed upon, colonized and commodified (Martineau 2015; Veissière and Stendel 2018; Zuboff 2019). Critical medical anthropology is uniquely suited for this endeavor as it focuses on the intersections of technological, political, ecological

and social change and the subjective, qualitative experience of being human. Anthropological methodologies enable researchers to study how such change impacts individual well-being as well as the cultural frame through which we attribute meaning to experiences of sickness and health (Amit 2015; Browner and Preloran 2010; Long and Moore 2013).

The impact of consumer cultural notions of efficiency, individualism and the ‘power’ of the consumer have already hugely impacted the functioning of healthcare systems in North America and beyond (Donald 2001, Izquierdo 2005; Keshavjee 2014). For example, the rise of “for-profit managed care” in American psychiatry, “has contributed to the production of thinking about mental illness,” argues Donald (2001, 429). By “adopting the notion that since mental illnesses are specific entities,” Donald (2001, 429) continues, “the practical treatment of each mental illness can be rationalized and streamlined just as the production of products in industry has been streamlined and made economically efficient.” Thus “efficiency as a notion has therefore and for a first time entered into psychiatric action as a moral good” (Donald 2001, 429). Donald (2001, 431-432) also describes the “development of algorithms of care which are efficiency based treatments usually grounded upon medication decision tree approaches.” Furthermore, “the ‘algorithmization’ of mental illness constitutes perhaps the most remarkable new world view within the heart of psychiatry” (Donald 2001, 431-432). A major medical anthropological issue that I explore in this thesis is the consumer cultural ideal which trades quality-of-attention and care for quantity and ‘efficiency.’ This is apparent in both how individual subjectivities are commodified and consumed in surveillance capitalism and how they are streamlined for economic reasons in neoliberal healthcare.

## **1.1 Research Questions**

By looking at narratives about social media use, I explore the following questions: 1) What does well-being mean for Millennials in a culture where social media use is expected and widely adopted as the norm; 2) Is social media affecting perceptions and embodiments of well-being in consumer culture and if so, how?

My objectives in answering these questions also include investigating how SNSs impact the construction of self-identity and sociality in consumer culture. Addressing these questions requires a semiotic and narrative approach to studying the metaphors and linguistic modes of thinking that participants have for themselves, their environment and others, which are embedded in their stories (Scheper-Hughes 1996; Levy and Hollan 2015). Attention must also be paid to the role that cultural and embodied patterns play in the narrative depictions and constructions of the concept of well-being, for example, how a new device or service can change daily habits and thus change the metaphors used to describe the quality of daily life (Adelson 2000). What are the implications of the consumption habits and communication patterns brought by ICTs? How do ICTs impact global assemblages of healthcare and transnational understandings of well-being (Collier and Ong 2005)? More ethnographic explorations of the new ways that young people are navigating their identities and social lives with ICTs can help us better understand the shifting perceptions and priorities of well-being concepts today.

## **1.2 Background**

As it stands, neoliberal healthcare systems increasingly reiterate the status of patients and citizens as ‘consumers first’ (Cavusoglu and Demirbag-Kaplan 2017; Keshavjee 2014; Kristensen *et al.* 2016). For example, in the UK, mass funding cuts for intensive mental healthcare facilities and programs has left patients who have more serious mental health difficulties at a loss for resources; a prioritization of the many with less serious health problems at the cost of the quality-of-life for the few who need more help (Watts 2017). Psychologist Jay Watts frequently publishes in academic journals and public media on the topics of mental health, self-harm in young people and new technologies, with one article titled, “Social media doesn’t make teenagers self-harm, neoliberalism does” (Watts 2016). Watts (2016, 2) writes that “whilst newspaper headlines blame the 24/7 nature of social media for the cult of competitiveness causing distress in this cohort, social media is but a symptom of the root cause.” Watts (2016, 2) explains, “neoliberalism locates competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. People are consumers, needing to compete successfully in the market from an ever earlier age, or fail.” Furthermore,

Watts (2016, 2) writes, neoliberalism locates “emotional distress as an individual problem in self-esteem or mental health,” which cripples our collective, cultural ability to conceptualize “how sociopolitical distress manifests in our bodies.” By attributing the responsibility of health to the individual, consumer cultural ideals weaken the strength of actual social networks and isolate and fragment the individual as a consumer – even of healthcare.

To counter neoliberal ideals, Watts (2016) suggests that, rather than blaming social media, we must show positive enforcement toward young people, prioritize quality education and “encourage youngsters to have a relationship to social media such that it is not a constant pressure to be ‘on’, to sell an impossible image.” Rather, she argues social media should act “as a potential source of creating new ways to be human, and to live a good, connected life.” Unfortunately, connecting individuals to live a better life is not at the forefront of Google and Facebook’s business model, as Zuboff (2019) demonstrates, but rather, these services are programmed for extraction. Indeed, education surrounding the responsible use of social media is crucial, but perhaps even more so, is the demand for the better consideration of human rights by technology conglomerates. A more refined focus of anthropological study is required on the role that mass-information consumption plays in developing subjectivities. Medical anthropological research in this area can also work toward mitigating the effects of the sociopolitical atmosphere and its quantification of care, to address the quality that is constantly being subverted in the Information Age and to practice constructive forms of resistance to consumer cultural ideals.

Pioneering social anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1946, 220) writes about the importance of studying the interplay between cultural patterns and individual responses to such, “stressing their mutual reinforcement,” and that “this rapport is so close that it is not possible to discuss patterns of culture without considering specifically their relation to individual psychology.” Critical-interpretive medical anthropology seeks to understand the individual and cultural meaning attached to states of sickness and health as well as to investigate the power structures which influence the creation of such meaning and the healthcare and biopolitical systems which manage and treat them (Scheper-Hughes 1990). Drawing on



this intersectional approach in my thesis, I explore the meanings that Millennials attach to well-being, goodness and vitality through the lens of their narratives. I rely on participants' narratives to reflect the manifestation of the economic and social on SNSs, the interconnectedness of the virtual and the actual, as well as to explore the influence these forces have on embodied practices that affect and define well-being.

The critical-interpretive medical anthropological approach was developed by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1990, 189-191), who calls for “a mediating, third path,” between “an anthropological knowledge that is largely ‘esoteric’ (concerned with ‘otherness’), subjective, symbolic and relativist,” and “a biomedical knowledge that is largely mundane, universalist in its claims, concrete, objective and radically materialist.” It is a semiotic approach which Scheper-Hughes (1996, 44) claims is “no different from the general field of critical-interpretive anthropology,” except in that it specifically rejects the body as simply an object. ‘Western biomedicine’ is criticized in medical anthropology for biologically reducing subjectivities of the body. For example, biomedical bodies are often considered merely the physiological bearer of symptoms, of which a patient-subject must simply be relieved. However, bodies are heavily symbolic and are continuously and reflexively engaged with, and constructed by, culture. In her push for a more “critical-interpretive perspective in medical anthropology,” Scheper-Hughes (1996, 42-43) claims that the “universalizing Western epistemological assumptions underlying the theory and practice of biomedicine” have largely been “exempt from cultural analysis.” In light of this, Scheper-Hughes (1996, 44) outlines that the role of critical-interpretive medical anthropology “is, first, to describe the culturally constructed variety of metaphorical conceptions (conscious and unconscious) about the body and associated narratives and then to show the social, political, and individual uses to which these conceptions are applied in practice.” Using a critical-interpretive medical anthropological approach, I explore two main levels of action in this thesis: first, the multiple and fragmented nature of narratives as augmented by ICTs; and second, the economy of Big Data and consumerism which increasingly influence constructions of well-being and healthcare (Adelson 2000; Donald 2001).

This thesis demonstrates that such a “mediating, third path” of medical anthropology must also be branched and multidisciplinary to critically investigate emerging intersubjectivities that are simultaneously actual and virtual, local and global, embodied and technologically augmented, which impact metaphors of the body and well-being. This thesis also outlines the intersectionality of Millennial identities, their relationships with technology and, more broadly, consumerism. More medical anthropological studies of healthcare infrastructure and subjective well-being are needed to better inform ICTs and qualitatively effective, culturally-conscious healthcare systems.

### **1.3 Thesis Statement**

In this thesis I argue that social media impact well-being for young people in consumer culture in two main ways. First, SNSs are a ‘useful tool’ for manifesting sociality, which is an essential aspect of well-being. Second, however, the intrinsic economy of social media isolates the individual, lowers the autonomy of users and encourages constant compulsive social media use. Not only do these factors challenge the participants’ criteria for well-being, but they are beginning to redefine well-being in such a way that further justifies these practices. This research links evolving concepts of sociality and time to well-being in consumer culture and highlights the importance of autonomy, self-concordance and dissidence in daily practice with social media and other ICTs.

## **1.4 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

### **1.4.1 Critical-Interpretive Medical Anthropology and Well-Being**

Humans are socialized to accept the meanings that their society attaches to physical, mental and social signifiers of illness and health. The role of critical-interpretive medical anthropology is to emphasize the cultural relativity of certain concepts that come to affect how people perceive well-being, for example, the dichotomies of mind and body, ‘Nature’ and civilization as well as good and evil are inextricably tied to understandings of illness and health, dirtiness and cleanliness, and are descendant from Cartesian and Protestant ideologies (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1987, 1996). Critical-interpretive medical anthropology

is also influenced by feminist understandings of both the human body as well as ‘Nature’ and the boundaries surrounding each. For example, Donna Haraway (1991) argues for the salience of concepts of ‘the cyborg’ in the late twentieth century. She states that cyborg entities are “made of, first, ourselves and other organic creatures in our unchosen ‘high-technological’ guise as information systems, text, and ergonomically controlled labouring, desiring, and reproducing systems. The second essential ingredient in cyborgs,” Haraway (1991, 1) writes, “is machines in their guise, also, as communication systems, texts, and self-acting, ergonomically designed apparatuses.” Cyborgs are part of what comprise Haraway’s (1991) notion of “boundary creatures,” which also include simians and women, for they occupy ever-shifting categories that are very much in flux with evolving techno-cultures and non-dominant narratives. It is this critical attention to intersections and liminalities that enables critical-interpretive medical anthropology to observe various roles of power and their corresponding effects on how individuals embody and perceive well-being.

Critical-interpretive medical anthropology encourages researchers to view oppositions and contradictions metaphorically, as they arise in narrative data, explanatory models, or embodied subjectivities, and to interpret them as being informed by the participant’s cultural background. According to Lock (2001, 478), the founding ethnographers of medical anthropology “made use of analytical frameworks in their research in which episodes of distress and sickness are conceptualized as vehicles for understanding constellations of associated knowledge and practices.” Those knowledges and practices, especially from those “domains of culture not obviously implicated in health and sickness,” can tell medical anthropologists a great deal about overarching structures of power and other modes of relations which inevitably influence cultural paradigms surrounding the physical body, health and well-being (Lock 2001, 478).

Emily Martin’s (2000) conceptualization of metaphor, gender and subjectivities in capitalism take critical medical anthropology into the Information Age. With the emergence of screen technologies and current neuroscience came an onslaught of literature positing the neurocentricity of consciousness and the

subsequent reduction of affect and subjectivities to neurological processes. Martin (2000, 576) writes that “culture has drained through the hole (between nature and culture) and dissolved in the realm of neural networks.” Indeed, surveillance capitalism has seen this come true. Current events demonstrate that the brain today is not “sovereign” like Martin (2000, 576) argues, but is instead public, accessible, impressionable and situated.

Martin (2000) also raises anthropological problems surrounding the emerging science dedicated to teaching machine intelligence to ‘be more human’. Martin’s (2000, 573) concern that “all human experiences and activities, including social behavior, can eventually be produced” has not altogether come true in the nearly two decades since her writing this, but it has morphed. Today, cognitive sciences are still massively funded and instead of attaining the technological reproduction of consciousness, they have contributed greatly to the technological mining of consciousness. Constellations of seemingly limitless data on individuals exist virtually: an avatar that participates in the economy without you, whose wholly human patterns and attributes are bartered and haggled for in virtual, non-human exchanges that end in under a second.

In this thesis, I focus on whether these realities, as accessed through participation on social media, shift well-being metaphors to prioritize other facets of embodied experience. A critical medical anthropological approach emphasizes the reflexive and relational feedback involved in this. Martin (2000, 575) argues:

If a more reductionistic and brain-based picture of human action displaced our current everyday mental concepts, it would not be because (or solely because) the neural net theory had won [...] It would be because the environment we live in (and that scientific theories are produced in) had shifted so that a brain-centered view of a person began to make cultural sense.

Martin describes the reflexive link between socio-technological change, the “metaphors we live by,” to use Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) phrase, and the simultaneous embodiment of change that demands affective descriptive tools.

Well-being itself is an elusive concept in medical anthropology and can easily become too generalized or too reduced. Adelson (2000, 7) argues that the biomedical construction of health in North America “permeates and is literally embodied in what people define as their own sense of well-being, so that values such as self-discipline, self-denial, control and will power are woven through – and impossible to disentangle from – interpretations of health.” Not only are these attitudes toward well-being produced and propelled by the individual, but they are also reflected and reinforced by the fabric of society and culture.

Margaret Lock and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1996) were the first to establish a mode of thinking in medical anthropology that specifies the multiple levels on which health and illness can be enacted, managed and analyzed, what they call, “the three bodies.” The three bodies are comprised of (1) the individual body and the experiences of the embodied self, (2) the social body as a symbol and communicator of meaning, and (3) the body politic, which are the regulating socio-cultural systems that manage individual and collective bodies, “in reproduction and sexuality, work, leisure, and sickness” (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1996, 45). Within each of these systems, there are patterns of thinking and acting that are rewarded and encouraged or ignored and punished, that together create localized perceptions of health and illness.

My approach to well-being in this thesis is on an individual level, insofar as personal agency, self-concordance, contentedness and biological health are important aspects of well-being. I also see well-being as social – it spreads. Well-being is an intersubjective, collective, dynamic, enacted process that is maintained over time with the involvement of many relationships. Furthermore, well-being doesn’t exist in a vacuum, it depends on external resources and broader socio-economic, cultural and environmental states.

#### **1.4.2 Subjectivity**

As increasingly more social networking devices are developed, it is important to consider how human subjectivities are changed through technological engagements; but, what exactly is meant by ‘subjectivity’? According to Biehl *et al.* (2007, 6), in the twelfth century ‘the subject’ was “one who owes

allegiance to a government or ruling power,” while, centuries earlier, for Aristotle, “the subject was also ‘the very material out of which things are made’.” In the nineteenth century, ‘subjectivity’ was used to emphasize “the human mind or individual experience,” and that ‘subjectivity’ “also implied a kind of affective domination, in which feelings, thoughts, concerns, and perceptions, all supposedly personal, overcome individuals and ‘cloud the eyes’” (Biehl *et al.* 2007, 6). Biehl *et al.* (2007, 6) suggest that this use of ‘subjectivity’ was perhaps in opposition to “the relentless encroachment of scientific worldviews [...] and the objectification of reality (Daston and Galison 1992).” Now, ‘subjectivity’ “does not imply error but connotes creativity, the possibility of a subject’s adopting a distinctive symbolic relation to the world in order to understand lived experiences” (Biehl *et al.* 2007, 6). In fields such as medical anthropology and cultural psychiatry, ‘subjectivity’ is understood as “a synonym for inner life processes and affective states” (Biehl *et al.* 2007, 6). One current issue surrounding the subject and subjectivity is the relationship between the self, mind and brain, as Choudhury and McKinney (2013) explore in the rhetoric of neuroscience. Another is what Biehl *et al.* (2007, 6) describe as “the limits of the subject,” and how legal, political, biomedical and social mechanisms have rendered certain forms of domination and power “an invisible and constitutive part of modern subjectivity” (Biehl *et al.* 2007, 6). These issues converge in the embodied practices and use of ICTs in consumer culture.

#### **1.4.3 The Embodied Self**

While the notion of a fully autonomous and unique ‘individual’ is normal in consumer culture and is a metaphor that biomedicine and popular media propel, in non-industrialized countries or cultures guided by religions that warn against the development of an individuated, closed-off selfhood, the ‘self-as-an-individual’ norm does not exist (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1996). ICTs in consumer culture tend to make visible and more tangible the networked nature of sociality and the self. Therefore, in this thesis, I draw on the concept of the ‘dividual,’ which opposes the notion of the fixed, whole and indivisible person. Instead, the ‘dividual’ enables researchers to think in alternative models of self and sociality, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the singular and the plural without propagating self—society binaries (LiPuma

2000; Strathern 1988). The dividual self-metaphor acknowledges a multiple and divisible nature of identity – one that relies on ‘the other’ for self-knowledge (Strathern 1988). The dividual also accounts for the internalization of society, rather than situating society as strictly external to the self (LiPuma 2000). This leaves a person’s “behaviours and intentions” to be “interpreted in terms of actions within a particular context,” rather than as influenced solely by the will and desires of that person (LiPuma 2000, 133). These nuances are important to acknowledge to resist the dominant biomedical self-metaphors which insist on the separation between the subject and object and mind and body.

Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of the ‘habitus’ also supports a by-passing of culturally-dominant binaries in that it “is a mediating notion that revokes the common sense duality between the individual and the social by capturing ‘the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality’” (Wacquant 2005, 316). The habitus includes but isn’t limited to the wealth of embodied behaviours that are impressed onto a person by their society (Navarro 2006). Individual subjectivities and agency as well as institutionalized power and societal structures inform the habitus, and it evolves over time through generations and cultural change in a reflexive partnership with acting bodies (Navarro 2006). The concept of the habitus is helpful in analyzing the mass-practices or habits associated with ICTs, for example, patterns of cell-phone use in public and other embodied changes that come with new technologies. Information on the level of the habitus can be derived from and embodied by individuals, but it is unconsciously constructed through social forces (Navarro 2006; Wacquant 2005).

An anthropological review of embodied forms of selfhood from non-consumer-driven societies shows that only certain self-metaphors are regarded as biomedically ‘healthy’. For example, most subjective experiences of multiple-selves are pathologized by North American psychiatry (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1996). Many ways of thinking about the self are deeply culturally-situated and only exist in relation to their particular culture. Lock and Scheper-Hughes (1996, 52) explain that in Japan, “one’s self identity changes with the social context, particularly within the hierarchy of social relations at any time.” With these “sociocentric conceptions of the self,” Lock and Scheper-Hughes (1996, 53) claim, “the individual

body-self tends to be fused with or absorbed by the social body.” Alternatively, there are conceptions of the self in non-consumer-driven cultures as more of a multiplicity of selves, or a dividual, where instead of a hierarchy between embodied selves and a society, there are “homologies and analogies” (Strathern 1988, 13; Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1996). Marilyn Strathern (1998, 15) explains that in Melanesia, a community is considered a unity, while a singular person is considered a multiplicity of identities: “it is to perceive that the body is a social microcosm *to the extent* that it takes a singular form. This form presents an image of an entity both as a whole and as holistic, for it contains within it diverse and plural relations.” The cultural understanding of the embodied self and the extent to which that self is considered a ‘person’ in the eyes of the community and the law is largely reflected in metaphor and narrative in that society (Crawford 1994; Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1996).

Robert Crawford (1994, 1347) writes that the pursuit of ‘health’ in North America has become “a ritual of personal regeneration in which middle class identity is secured and conspicuously displayed.” Crawford (1994) observes that much of peoples’ understandings of themselves is highly bound with notions of what is ‘healthy’. This state of self-betterment or wholeness in consumer culture is always sought after, and therefore, the unhealthy is cast out as the other, influencing sociality, class and illness (Heil 2009). ‘Health’, ‘goodness’ and social responsibility are thus tied and opposed to illness and things that are ‘wrong’ or ‘bad,’ such as social and sexual deviance, crime and substance abuse (Crawford 1994). Crawford (1994, 1348) argues that in North America, “the concept of health is absolutely central to modern identity,” moreover, that ‘health’ and the body are “metaphorically layered, packed with connotations about what it means to be a good, respectable and responsible person.” As these meanings evolve, they reinforce stereotypes about the ‘unhealthy other’, and instill boundaries between “prevailing images of class, race, and sexuality” (Crawford 1994, 1348). By using a critical interpretive medical anthropological approach in this thesis, I investigate the nuances of meaning production in a materialistic culture. I look deeply at the subjectivities surrounding metaphor and narrative, habitual tool use and the social determinants and construction of well-being.



#### 1.4.4 Capitalism and Consumerism

The relationship between embodied states, well-being and capitalist modes of production and consumption have long been the subject of critical and sociological study (Adorno [1944] 1993; Zeitlin 1968). Recently, feminist and medical anthropologists have turned to studies of the “production and distribution of material culture” for its implications for selfhood, such as, gender constructs as well as other constructs of embodiment and identity which are understood to impact well-being paradigms (Perry and Potter 2006, 115). With capitalism’s tendency to produce a steady flow of consumer goods at the lowest feasible price, economist, individualist and political theorist Adam Smith (1776) claims that the individual acting in his or her own self-interest will bring society the best long-term outcomes (Zeitlin 1968). Perhaps in the same vein, US President George W. Bush (2006), at a news conference in the economic aftermath of 9/11, urges Americans: “and I encourage you all to go shopping more,” if not “to achieve important goals for the American people here at home,” then, to help innocent Iraqi families secure a “peaceful existence.” From the beginning, capitalism has been associated with concepts of utopia and peace, where humans will indeed work less with new technologies of automation taking care of most labour and where the means of subsistence will be plentiful (Zeitlin 1968).

Critical theorists Marx and Engels argue, however, that the bonds between humanity and its surroundings are much more meaningful than the mere individual acquisition of and reign over resources (Zeitlin 1968). It is part of the embodied human experience to “appropriate the materials of nature and by their modification create a super-organic world of man-made artifacts” (Zeitlin 1968, 97). Given the entwined nature of human labour, the body and identity, the actions that individuals take to acquire their means of subsistence, therefore, ultimately impact their experiences and notions of well-being. Furthermore, Marx and Engels (1998) explain that capitalist modes of production are more than just mass reproductions of organic lifeways: by way of transforming the labourers, capitalism also creates embodied, and eventually cultural, shifts in what it means to be an embodied self. For labour “is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their

part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with *how* they produce” (Marx and Engels 1998, 37). Though Marx spoke about the Industrial Revolution’s division of labour, the means of producing commodities such as digital information must continue to be critically investigated.

Sherry Turkle (1995, 177-178), inexplicably credited on the back of her book as the “Margaret Mead of cyberspace,” observes a “utopian discourse about decentralization” with the emergence of internet technologies. She writes, “these days, always-on connection leads us to reconsider the virtues of a more collaborative self. All questions about autonomy look different if, on a daily basis, we are together even when we are alone” (Turkle 2011, 169). While Turkle (2011, 11) claims that technologies are redrawing the “boundaries between intimacy and solitude,” she substantiates these claims with extreme individual accounts. Turkle (2011, 184) suggests there are no alternatives for users than to use Facebook and emphasizes an absolute agency of the interface. Significantly, Turkle does not address the strategies individuals use to negotiate a balance nor does she expand on the nuances of consideration individuals use to tend to relationships and responsibilities, both at and away from the keys. For this reason, Turkle’s (2011) book is an example of how discourse addressing ICTs can turn into a dystopian discourse, primarily, one of risk, and can influence public perceptions, further emphasizing the need for critical ethnography in this area.

The relationship between productive technologies and the hopes for a less centralized economy is not limited to the rise of digital technologies. Marx was also attracted to the utopian discourse of a decentralized society, which he thought the then-new technologies of production and the division of labour might enable (Zeitlin 1968). In 1944, however, with “the dissolution of the last remnants of precapitalism,” Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer ([1944] 1993, 1) write, “a technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself.” What might have been a decentralized society became a massive center for the inescapable hierarchy of capitalism. Adorno and Horkheimer ([1944] 1993, 1) criticize the organization of capitalism’s “few production centers and the large number of widely dispersed

consumption points,” and claim that manipulation and “retroactive need” comprise the cycle on which consumerism and materialism depend. They describe that “the city housing projects designed to perpetuate the individual as a supposedly independent unit in a small hygienic dwelling make him all the more subservient to his adversary—the absolute power of capitalism” (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 1993, 1). Furthermore, Adorno and Horkheimer ([1944] 1993, 1) observe that capitalism acquires its power not by powerful people concealing its violence or their monopolies, but through the burgeoning ideology that popular media itself is business—a “culture industry.” While capitalism formed a hierarchy between producers and consumers, a great ‘flattening-out’ or plateau occurred in terms of quality once consumerism took over the production of culture (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 1993). Radio, “the sound film” and novels increasingly adhered to the same values: “the universal criterion of merit is the amount of ‘conspicuous production,’ of blatant cash investment” (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 1993, 2-3). This statement can easily be applied to the state of ‘pop culture’ today, however, the advent of internet technologies has arguably turned the hierarchy between producers and consumers on its head (Thayne 2012).

In a similar way to how early capitalist technologies of production divided the labour of the embodied self, surveillance capitalism fragments consumption and, arguably, therefore, fragments the self (Thayne 2012; Zuboff 2019). Throughout this thesis, although I see ICTs and social media as new means for self-expression, communication and entertainment, I treat them primarily as technologies of production, consumption and extraction.

#### **1.4.5 Shifting Body-Mind Metaphors**

Bringing a critical interpretive medical anthropological discourse into the context where humans and ICTs meet is crucial for understanding how human subjectivities are shaped, both by the embodied behaviours that SNSs perpetuate as well as by the symbolic and cultural forms that exist in virtual places. As Migliore (2001, 101) writes, it is important to “constantly seek to modify, redefine, and reexplain phenomena whose essence cannot be captured.” The environment – ecological, political, technological,

etc. – is in a constant state of flux. The symbols that people use to construct their identities and understand their experiences are ever-changing and reflexive of this environment while at the same time are agents of its change (Garro and Mattingly 2000; Mattingly 1994). For this reason, subjectivities must not be seen as static but as in a constant state of becoming, fuelled by and fuelling broader cultural change (Biehl *et al.* 2007). As linguistic tropes, metaphors and ‘turns of speech’ evolve from the intersections of social life and the material world, the domain of culture is produced (Biehl *et al.* 2007). For example, Lock and Scheper-Hughes (1987, 23) explain that the “body-as-machine metaphor” was once a predominant model for thinking about the mind and body: “We rely on the body-as-machine metaphor each time we describe our somatic or psychological states in mechanistic terms, saying that we are ‘worn out’ or ‘wound up,’ or like when we say that we are ‘run down’ and that our ‘batteries need recharging.’” Furthermore, “metaphors have moved from a mechanical to an electrical mode” with “the computer age [lending] us a host of new expressions, including the all-too familiar complaint: ‘my energy is down’” (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1987, 23). While electronic and digital machines reflect precision, discipline and rational cognitive abilities, the Internet also reminds us, in its similarity to the human mind, that humans are more than rational, computing machines. Indeed, our subjective feelings and the flexibility of human thought are what differentiate us from computers.

The field of neuroscience has greatly benefited from the same screen-technologies as personal computers. Discoveries made through research using fMRI scanners have been widely referenced as influencing the emergence of new body metaphors in the Information Age (Choudhury and McKinney 2013; Malabou 2008). In his ethnography of French neuroscientists, Tobias Rees (2010, 150) explains that “throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scientists believed that the adult human brain is fully developed, organized in fixed and immutable function-specific neural circuits.” However, neuroscience now demonstrates that the brain can no longer be considered ‘fixed’ after developmental years, but that it remains malleable and plastic, with the potential to both habituate new neural pathways and eliminate others (Rees 2010). According to Pitts-Taylor (2010, 641), “the development of plasticity discourse is highly compatible with

the neoliberal pressures of self-care, personal responsibility, and constant flexibility.” Neuroscientific discourse has also advanced understandings of the human brain not as determined and permanent, but as environmentally situated, an “organ” that is “always in the process of becoming” (Dr. Prochiantz in Rees 2010, 152).

The ‘plastic brain’ can be interpreted to mean sensitive, vulnerable and even at-risk on a neuronal level to the stimuli of its environment. This often leads to its use in media to support fear mongering and a discourse of risk (Choudhury and McKinney 2013). One such example is that of Baroness Susan Greenfield, “a prominent UK neuroscientist and public intellectual,” writes Choudhury and McKinney (2013, 193). Greenfield is quoted to say that “technologies are infantilising the brain into the state of small children who are attracted by buzzing noises and bright lights, who have a small attention span and who live for the moment” (Derbyshire, 2009). Themes of anxiety over perpetual emotional infancy and ‘living for the moment’ are common in academic critiques of new media technologies since the television (Lasch 1979; Cowan-Jenssen and Goodison 2009). As ICTs are being developed, produced and accessed by so many members of society at alarmingly rapid rates, it is important to question “how different media technologies remake human consciousness, perception, and cognition – reorganizing sociality, raising questions about what is at stake in our moral worlds, and reframing the ontology of the human” (Choudhury and McKinney 2013, 194). Moreover, Choudhury and McKinney (2013, 207) say that by “providing commentary and expertise on the social problem, psychologists, sociologists, educators, and policy-makers actually contribute to its construction as a social problem and enable the formation of categories” (Choudhury and McKinney 2013, 207). The example they provide of this phenomenon resides in the institution of neuroscience, which they claim, “is an interpretive discipline shot through with cultural metaphors and motifs, availing itself to the perpetuation of certain worries” (Choudhury and McKinney 2013, 209). A critical interpretive medical anthropological approach to issues of well-being in consumer culture acknowledges the centrality of situated experiences within a network of meaning,

ultimately realizing more holistic representations of how ICTs impact human subjectivities and strategies of maintaining balance in the face of an ever-changing environment.

Choudhury and McKinney (2013, 193) explain that “media anxiety” has been traced “as far back as 2,500 years ago when Socrates contested the institutionalization of writing.” They assert that “anxieties such as these are nothing new, as emergent media technologies have long generated collective fears” (Choudhury and McKinney 2013, 193). The topic of adolescent behaviour and the “growing alarm about intense, addictive, and widespread media consumption in modern societies” are often surrounded with anxiety, and while the evidential basis for such anxiety “is thin and ambiguous, it has immense social influence” (Choudhury and McKinney 2013, 192). Indeed, as Fischer (2003, 50) asserts, an investigation of the impact of “machinic assemblages” on society cannot do “without hermeneutics, without following out the play of metaphors, semiotic analysis, and the transfer of meanings from setting to setting.” For this reason, proper narrative analyses of human experiences with social media are invaluable.

One example of shifting metaphor surrounding popular discourse on new media can be found in Sherry Turkle’s (1995) *Life on Screen*. Representing public opinion more so than vigorous anthropological research, Turkle (1995, 268) seeks to explore whether internet culture encourages people to experience life through a ‘shallower’ set of meanings and experiences, what she calls getting “lost in the surfaces.” Metaphors of flattening and plateaus, as mentioned in the previous section, are common in academic discourse on capitalism, materialism and new economic structures enabled by ICTs and can refer to human control over nature, the collapse of certain traditional hierarchies or, simply, interpersonal superficiality (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Higman 2017). Nicholas Carr (2010), like Turkle, grapples with this superficiality in his *New York Times* best-seller, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, wherein he “laments the rise of ‘pancake people,’ those who think widely but superficially and skim-read headlines,” as summarized by Choudhury and McKinney (2013, 196). Though they pander to public fears and moral panic, these books represent a growing conception of superficiality and neuroplasticity outside of academia, which in turn signifies a potential uptake of these metaphors with

which individuals now think. For example, Turkle (1995, 177) introduces readers in *Life on Screen* to emerging trends of a digitized society and asserts that “we are learning to see ourselves as plugged-in technobodies.” As societal acceptance of ICTs allows – or forces – us to see ourselves in new ways, it is important to question which doors are being opened, to understand well-being in new ways, and which are being closed. The emerging metaphors of de-centralization, flatness and branching and dynamic change indicate a culture wherein the ties that connect individuals are perhaps as significant as the forces which keep them apart.

#### **1.4.6 Internet Culture**

According to Wilson and Peterson (2002, 450), “much of the early literature surrounding the Internet regarded the new technology as revolutionary in both its technical innovation and its broad social and political implications (Benedikt 1991, Gore 1991, Negroponte 1995).” Indeed, as theorized in several “early revolutionary visions,” Web 3.0 brings capitalist and economic forces into the same field as not only our social and media engagements but also most aspects of daily life (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 451). Although Turkle’s (1995; 2011) work is frequently drawn upon for better understandings of the self in the digital age (Boellstorff 2008; Kirmayer *et al.* 2013), her work is limited by its extremism and does not provide a well-rounded articulation of everyday life with new technologies (Wilson and Peterson 2002). More anthropological research into these novel subjective spaces where economic powers meet the psychological is needed.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Wilson and Peterson (2002, 451) explain, “the salience” of many accounts of life with new technologies began to dwindle, “overtaken by what Margolis and Resnick (2000) call the ‘normalization of cyberspace.’” I have yet to find medical anthropological literature on the effects of ICTs on well-being in consumer culture, however, a growing focus on ‘affect’ in cultural anthropology is producing very relevant research to this topic (Stewart 2017). Stewart (2017, 192-193) writes, “in the world that affect brought into view [for anthropology], the point of analysis was not to track the predetermined *effects* of abstractable logics and structures but, rather, to compose a

register of the lived *affects* of the things that took place in a social-aesthetic-material-political worlding.” Furthermore, from this perspective, says Stewart (2017, 192), “ethnographic writing began, again, to try to describe collective states and sensibilities hitting people and traversing otherwise incommensurate things: [...] the rhythms of a daily living, and the strangely connective tissue produced by handheld devices and social media.” Despite the popularization of digital technologies in the early 2000s, Wilson and Peterson (2002, 450) describe an absence of ethnographic work “on computing and internet technologies within anthropology.” A lack of strong anthropological discourse on ICTs at that time, according to Wilson and Peterson (2002, 450), reflects the reality that “anthropology has not played a central role in studies of mass media in the past.” They explain, “anthropologists have positioned media as peripheral to culture (Dickey 1997) or have viewed technology in general as a context for, rather than a central part of, culture (Aronowitz 1996, Hakken 1999, Latour 1992, Pfaffenberger 1992)” (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 450). Recently, however, cultural anthropological studies on the concept of ‘speed’ lend themselves to the topic of well-being in consumerism insofar as they interrogate ICTs’ role in the human perception of time and how that affects subjectivities, which I discuss in Chapter Five (Duclos 2017; Duclos *et al.* 2017; Farías 2017; Farías and Höhne 2016). In addition to this, there have been several works, which I will draw upon throughout, from sociology, psychology, performance studies, transcultural psychiatry, new media studies as well as economics and marketing, that explore what it means to be human, and virtually so, and what the cultural implications may be for conceptions of well-being with future technologies (Adler 2017; Cavusoglu and Demirbag-Kaplan 2017; Taylor *et al.* 2017; Veissière and Stendel 2018; Zhao and Zappavigna 2017).

The paradox of ‘life imitating art or art imitating life’ springs to mind when thinking about social media. In the early-internet days of Second Life, a virtual world and internet computer game, Tom Boellstorff (2008) writes that the screen began to feel like a semi-permeable boundary, one that enabled the sharing of consequences cross-medium. While this is still the case, the advent of smart-technology and data plans lets users carry access to such virtuality nearly everywhere. If the boundaries between the



virtual and actual were semi-permeable then, now it is easy to imagine this boundary as dissolved. In his ground-breaking ethnography *Coming of Age in Second Life* (also a reference to Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*) Boellstorff (2008, 5) promotes "an anthropology of modernity," one that treats multi-sited, technologically-mediated subjectivities as "nodes of an emergent cultural formation that is at once transnational, national, and local, at once virtual and actual." Boellstorff (2008, 19) says that how we treat the virtuality of internet places, at least in English-speaking consumerism, is dependant on "longstanding oppositions of mind versus body, object versus essence, and structure versus agency, among others." The word 'virtual,' writes Boellstorff (2008, 19), means 'almost,' and "can thus be understood in terms of potentiality (Massumi 2002, 30); it can be said to exist whenever there is a perceived gap between experience and 'the actual.'" Furthermore, he writes, "this gap between the virtual and actual is critical: were it to be filled in, there would be no virtual worlds, and in a sense no actual world either" (Boellstorff 2008, 19). It is not only ICTs which create the virtual. Rob Shields (2003, 2) writes, "dreams, memories and the past are famously defined by Marcel Proust in his correspondence on *Remembrance of Time Past* as virtual: 'real without being actual, ideal without being abstract.'" In this way, the spaces which ICTs create are liminal, they are in-between, neither actual nor unreal nor inanimate, yet, within the virtual remains the essence and the effect, which are real.

#### **1.4.7 Non-Binary Theory in Anthropology**

Constant developments in the world of technology are important to study anthropologically as they promote, according to Fischer (2003, 37), "emergent forms of life" and emergent means through which well-being and identity are enacted. "Traditional concepts and ways of doing things no longer work," says Fischer (2003, 37), "life is outrunning the pedagogies in which we have been trained." In turning toward studies of the Internet and consumer culture, medical anthropologists can offer critical analyses of another "organ of reality," the Web and its many social platforms (Cassirer 1946). With the acceleration and paradoxes of today's social and embodied changes, it is fundamentally important for anthropologists to

study the forces at the intersections of technology and materialism, economy and sociality in consumer culture that shape conceptions of well-being.

Despite a lack of research from medical anthropology on the specific intersections of social media and well-being in consumerism, there is a wealth of literature from other disciplines that I rely on heavily. Increasingly, cultural anthropological research draws on concepts that Gilles Deleuze and his work with Felix Guattari popularized (Beihl and Locke 2010; Boellstorff 2008; Boyer 2015; Duclos 2017; Duclos *et al.* 2017; Stewart 2017). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) champion the approach of ‘non-binary’ logic, claiming that the ‘space’ between subject and object is an illusion perpetuated by the hierarchies of Christian and Cartesian philosophical systems. Instead, they propose the metaphors of the ‘rhizome,’ a type of branching plant root system, or that of a grid, which they use to convey how subjectivities and affect are ontologically integrated (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) use the rhizome metaphor to emphasize the inseparable relationship between subjects and objects, which is the foundation for much research in assemblage and affect approaches of critical-feminist, cultural and cyborg anthropology, reflexive ethnography as well as cognitive and neuro-psychology (Braidotti 2017; Grusin 2017; Haraway 2015; Hutto *et al.* 2018; Stewart 2017).

Nothing occurs in and of itself, especially regarding socio-cultural phenomena. Although binaries are culturally, linguistically and conceptually engrained into daily logics, human subjectivities cannot be separated as neatly as subject—object, and, as Haraway (2015, 159) writes, such subjectivities rely on “assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors [to] make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too” (Haraway 2015, 159). ICTs enable a growing permeability between the realms of economics, politics, global media, science and technology. These realms which once stood more independently from each other, now unravel and intertwine into far-reaching horizons and decentralized networks which converge upon the agency of individuals, as nodes upon a rhizome (Kirmayer *et al.* 2013; Pitts-Taylor 2010; Thayne 2012).

One example of this messiness between oft-thought distinct categories is the issue of virtuality and its relation to reality. Boellstorff (2008, 36) writes: “As one person in Second Life put it, ‘our virtual relationships are just as real as our rl [real life] ones.’ Such ramifications take advantage of the gap between virtual and actual. They do not blur or close that gap, for their existence depends upon the gap itself.” Boellstorff (2008, 36) observes that “what happens in virtual worlds often is just as real, just as meaningful” as offline experiences. He draws on Deleuze (2004, 260), who claims that “the virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual. The virtual is fully real insofar as it is virtual...the virtual must be defined as strictly a part of the real object.” The integrated nature of subjective virtuality and the objectivity of the material world calls for reflexive theoretical and ethnographic approaches to understand well-being and the influence of power in consumer culture.

As consumerist societies are propelled by ICTs, the reflexive functions of the attention economy call into question the traditionally understood boundaries around the subject and object, thus reformulating the relation between the self and other (Duclos 2017). Narratives are woven across “a thousand plateaus” of the virtual and actual with increasing ease and proficiency (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Questions now arise as to how, and how fast, ICTs will continue to facilitate cultural change. Not only that, but how will these new capabilities of speed, multitasking and full-on virtual immersion affect our understandings of well-being, time and what it means to be human? Vincent Duclos (2017, 25) writes, “an anthropology of speed [...] is concerned with the relationship between the prevailing resentment against the future and the experience of a contracted accelerated present.” At the forefront of anthropological thought on ICTs are questions of well-being, including a much broader, global understanding of humanity’s balance.

Duclos (2017, 25) argues that focusing anthropological thought onto the sociocultural effects of ICTs also forces us to critically consider “the raw materials and resources of the Earth that make technology happen, the exhausting efforts involved in suppressing the pull of electronic solicitation, or the bodily and psychosocial effects of staying on at all times—which themselves include hyperactivity, a narrowing of sensory responsiveness, and addiction to digital stimulation.” Anthropological research on ICTs suggests

that the emergence of technological augmentation in consumer culture both hampers and enhances human subjectivities in very complex ways (Duclos 2017). Anthropology seems now to be at a crossroads with the study of ICTs and faces the great task of further expanding alternative ontological and epistemological models.

### **1.5 Significance and Thesis Outline**

By studying social media and ICTs from a critical interpretive medical anthropological standpoint, I hope to contribute to a growing body of qualitative and interdisciplinary understandings of well-being in consumer culture. This thesis articulates the intersections of the body, objects, information and time with ICTs and demonstrates both their detrimental and enhancing influences. By connecting self-concordance, autonomy and well-being, this research demonstrates the importance of critically engaging with and questioning the roles of new technologies, especially social media, before habituating their use into everyday routines. This thesis also highlights multiple perceptions and expectations of sociality from participants, which play a fundamental role in well-being as well as in justifying habitual social media use. By positioning well-being with ICTs as a balance between maintaining fulfilling social relations while at the same time nurturing personal quality time, this research situates the anthropology of ICTs and social media in current medical anthropological discourse on intersubjectivities and encourages more future research in this area.

I describe the participant recruitment process and my use of pseudonyms in Chapter Two, as well as, participant confidentiality and the formulation of interview questions. I briefly explain person-centered interviewing techniques and describe the interview process, including the setting. I then describe the secondary ethnographic method I used, the audio diaries, and why I chose to use this method. In the final sections, I outline the importance of NVivo, the qualitative analysis software, as well as discuss the minor roles of participant observation and reflexive ethnography in this thesis.

In Chapter Three, I address the individual and embodiment by looking at the cases of four participants. The first part of this chapter outlines the cases of Trevor and Lisa. These cases depict the

widespread use of ICTs and the beneficial as well as detrimental relational patterns individuals enact with these technologies. This section also outlines the valuable role of autonomy in defining and maintaining well-being in consumer culture. The second half of Chapter Three involves two other participants, Jo and Cindy. Their cases demonstrate how individuals question the worth of efficiency and instead value autonomy. Jo is wary of ICTs altogether, knowing that the rewards she reaps from staying focused offline are better than the so-called efficiency she experiences online. Cindy, though she uses social media more than Jo, demonstrates that she does not let social media carry her into its agenda. On the contrary, Cindy uses ICTs as a ‘useful tool’ self-concordantly. This chapter demonstrates that autonomy plays a central role in the maintenance of balance and well-being, and that the implicit rhetoric of ‘efficiency’ in technoculture, in part, stands in opposition to autonomy and must be critically questioned.

In Chapter Four, I present the cases of participants Friedrich and Laura. These cases demonstrate moving between the virtual and the actual. Friedrich and Laura represent how carrying one’s autonomous selfhood between these planes deeply impacts a full sense of well-being over time. In the first section, I outline the major role that sociality plays in well-being and I situate sociality as a concept in anthropology. In the next section, I describe the role of narrative analysis and linguistic study in situating the above themes in virtual contexts and provide narrative and ethnographic examples. The main facet that is missing, for Friedrich, from a full sense of well-being is that of togetherness or sociality in his time spent online. For Laura, who demonstrates a more networked and busy sense of self-duty while online, a sense of too much sociality is experienced as detrimental to her well-being.

The next section is titled ‘the desire for friendship manifested online’ and involves contrasting narratives from Friedrich, Jo and participant Katy. Together, they portray the discouragement, tact and opportunism that can be involved in synchronizing personal and social expectations with actual experiences on social media. The commodification of sociality is a major issue for well-being in consumer culture and is addressed in the next section. Cindy demonstrates how the production of information and information-as-objects in consumer culture intercept and interweave with sociality online. Laura

demonstrates the semiotics of sociality online in a section called ‘the looking glass self’ and another participant, Tanner, demonstrates an alternative perspective on the semiotics of self in the following section, ‘consume to become – you are what you eat’. This chapter addresses the significance of studying selfhood, friendship and sociality in consumer culture while also exploring the economic powers involved in the complex whole of well-being.

Finally, Chapter Five on temporality and subjectivity draws on data from the audio diaries, which are self-recordings made by participants. I introduce the concept of ‘object time’ and examine the relationship between objects, information and time perception and management in excerpts from a participant named Natalie’s audio diary. Natalie’s audio diary demonstrates how interests of social media users are exploited to prolong users’ activities online. I provide a brief history of the study of time in relation to capitalist economic mechanisms and the evolution of the concept of time from the Middle Ages to today.

In the following section titled ‘colonizing temporal subjectivities’, I outline how, throughout history, different time-keeping methods have controlled and influenced the social perception of time in various ways related to mass production and consumption. I then explore the audio diary of Tanner and investigate the possible implications of living according to the object time of social media and ICTs. In the section titled ‘monitoring in object time’, I introduce research from Veissière and Stendel (2018) who argue that SNSs are hyper-social rather than anti-social and it is precisely this which heightens the addictiveness of SNSs. I address the themes of ‘individuality’ and ‘independence’ and introduce participant Jamal. I then conclude this chapter with a discussion of the themes ‘spending time’ and ‘killing time’ and examine the role of time perception and time use in well-being.

In the conclusion chapter, I summarize the results of the analysis done in each of the three body chapters and address how each corresponds to the initial research questions and how these questions may be rethought and expanded for future research. In all, this thesis moves from the level of the individual body to the body politic and how it engages with virtuality both online and away from the keys. This thesis culminates at the level of social and mass consumption of information and shows the influence of

objects on our social perception of time. Ultimately, time perception and the objects we surround ourselves with are hugely influential on both the social creation of the concept of well-being, as well as how well-being is embodied, practiced and maintained.

## CHAPTER 2 METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I will discuss the methods used to collect and analyze the data in this study as well as ethical considerations such as the use of pseudonyms for participants and confidentiality. I used two methods to gather narrative data: person-centered interviews and audio diaries. Both are influenced by Levy and Hollan's (2015) approach to person-centered interviewing, which I discuss in more detail below.

### **2.1 Participants and Recruitment**

The participants are 13 Millennials – generally understood as, “people reaching young adulthood in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Google 2017) – who were recruited through snowball sampling. Seven participants are women, ages 18-28, with a median age of 24. Six participants are men, ages 18-30, also with a median age of 24.

Six participants were born outside of Canada: five are Canadian citizens and one is an international student from China who is studying at the University of Saskatchewan. Of the Canadian citizens, three are University of Saskatchewan students, one is a University of Ottawa student and one is a full-time worker in Saskatoon. The remaining seven participants were born in Canada: three live in Calgary, one college student, one full-time worker who attends college and one University of Calgary student; and four live in Saskatoon and are University of Saskatchewan students. In total, all but one participant are students.

To recruit, I placed posters around the University of Saskatchewan campus and at off-campus cafés. I also advertised on the University of Saskatchewan's online bulletin, PAWS, and made a page dedicated to outlining my proposed thesis on Facebook to advertise to my friends on the website. Several participants were recruited through virtual media, either seeing my Facebook posting or hearing about it through mutual friends. With these individuals who were not based in Saskatoon, I maintained contact by email and was able to conduct our interviews over Skype.

Additionally, I emailed over 30 professors at the University of Saskatchewan in the humanities, fine arts and computer sciences and asked them if it would be okay to speak to their classes about my thesis.



Many said, unfortunately, they could not fit me in or that my topic just wasn't relevant to their class. About one third of the professors I contacted were able to accommodate me. With these classes, I introduced myself and explained that I plan to look at well-being in consumer culture through the 'windows' of social media. I said some variation of, "I want to see if social media are changing the ways in which we perceive well-being. If so, I will ask how they are shaping our everyday behaviours and how these behaviours enforce and/or defeat our current conceptions of well-being. I am looking for participants so that I can collect stories of social media use. With these, I look at how metaphors are used and how different values are placed within these contexts." Some individuals emailed me right away after my presentations and others became participants after hearing about a presentation from a friend or a professor.

The drawback of recruiting in this way was, most notably, that it was very time consuming. Although it was not exactly snowball sampling because I was not solely relying on participants' social networks to spread the awareness of this study, I was relying on word of mouth and doing my best to get the word out (Guest 2015).

### **2.1.1 Ethics**

This research (BEH 15-193) received research ethics approval on August 13, 2015 (See Appendix B) and was last renewed for another year on September 1, 2018. Before beginning interviews, I obtained either written consent from participants who I interviewed face-to-face or verbal consent from participants who I interviewed over Skype. Throughout this thesis, I use pseudonyms for the names of participants and any names that they mention, such as the names of friends and relatives. I also alter all other identifying information, such as IP addresses and street names, to keep the identity of participants confidential.

## **2.2 Person-Centered Interviews**

Person-centered interviews are an approach to interviewing used to capture more candid stories from participants to see the natural modes and relations of understanding that participants employ to think about their experiences or to explain them to others (Levy and Hollan 2015). By using semi-structured

interviews, I encouraged the participants to build upon their answers to my questions until deeper, more anecdotal material arose. Since the participants share many aspects of being a Millennial in the Information Age, and since language and culture are inseparably connected, the common linguistic tropes and metaphors collected across these data reveal something of the tacit aspects of culture – aspects that are deeper than the descriptive content of our dialogues but exist mainly in the thematic undercurrents (Musante 2015).

What sets person-centered interviewing apart from other social scientific interviewing methods is that it treats the participant as both an informant and respondent. Levy and Hollan (2015, 316) explain that, while an informant is “a knowledgeable person who can tell the anthropologist-interviewer about culture and behavior in a particular locale,” a respondent is “an object of systematic study and observation in him- or herself.” In person-centered interviewing the researcher balances the strengths and weaknesses of both ways to engage their participants and, in doing so, they’re able to contrast where the data gathered from these two approaches overlap and diverge from each other. This points to different rifts and excesses of subjective experience and can hint at emerging trends in new subjectivities which are only beginning to emerge or become settled into culture.

One thing I would have done differently in this thesis is fine-tune and better utilize Levy and Hollan’s (2015) insight for my interview guide; making deliberate questions about participants’ own experiences then contrasting them with questions about what they can tell me of other people in this same context. When preparing this thesis, I was inspired by Levy and Hollan’s (2015) chapter in *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, which influenced my attempt at respondent- and informant-oriented lines of questioning (see Appendix C). However, I feel the interviews would have been more effective if I had been better prepared for keeping the discussions more focused and on-track yet still open-ended.

For example, I sometimes indulged in talking about the generalizations that participants would bring up. I could often relate to these as a social media user, but the statements did not necessarily describe the participants’ personal experiences. This rendered those responses to be more like broad cultural

commentary than personal narrative. On the other hand, speaking about generalizations tended to function as a kind of small-talk or a mutual acknowledgement of essential aspects of social media which, when mentioned, help build rapport. For example, I asked one participant, Jo, “How do you think people would be different without Facebook?” She said, “I think they would be more polite in public,” which eventually led to, “I think [people are] always looking at their phones and that becomes a paranoia in some people, and some people become stuck and they just can’t even function normally anymore.” I could relate to her observation in a way that I think many social media users can, but this discussion did not delve into Jo’s personal experiences on this matter. Furthermore, my questions did not always oscillate from respondent- to informant-oriented as adeptly as I would have liked throughout my interviews. In the analysis, however, I was still able to differentiate the narratives which arose from a respondent vantage versus those from an informant vantage, and further, those excerpts which were not narratives at all but general opinions.

During the interview process, I also wanted to ensure that enough participants would agree to create audio diaries. These were intended to frame participants as respondents even more. While the interviews were meant to capture what the participants think they do, think they should do and think that others do, the audio diaries were an attempt to capture what participants actually do.

Pioneers of the person-centered interview approach, Levy and Hollan (2015, 313) ask a question that remains central to this thesis: “to what degree and in what way are [community members] at least partially autonomous individuals, engaged in a dynamic, sometimes coercive, sometimes enabling interplay, with a context that is in some way separate from and alien to them?” SNSs and apps are a relatively new phenomenon, involving specific computational languages on one side, and very nuanced, ever-evolving dialects, memes and shorthand to communicate in text, image or video on the other. In virtual worlds, the creation of the binary fabric of webpages is heavily informed by behavioural psychology and neuroscience to ensure its optimal coercive force (Hirsch *et al.* 2012; Thayne 2012). It’s important to acknowledge, given that SNSs and apps are openly engineered to capture the attention of individuals, that all means

available are used to keep users on webpages for as long as possible, garnering the label, ‘the attention economy’ (Thayne 2012).

Although Levy and Hollan (2015) were not specifically talking about virtual worlds, their insight plays a central role in understanding the narratives in this thesis. Person-centered interviewing acknowledges that a context itself has, in some ways, an intelligence and shaping-capacity of its own that will inform the stories of participants (Levy and Hollan 2015). While conducting the person-centered interviews, I constantly sought to find the edge of the interplay between the more basic desires of the participants – friendship, family, entertainment – and their wants and needs which may be imposed upon them from their shared context.

### **2.2.1 Interview Setting**

The interviews took place in the Ethnography Lab of the University of Saskatchewan’s Archaeology and Anthropology building. I notified participants ahead of time that they will be asked to access their Facebook Timeline page at the start of interviews. For this, we had a laptop computer that sat at the table beside us. Mostly, having the participants log-on to Facebook simply aided in setting the tone for talking about social media, the blue of the Facebook home-screen shining onto us. I wanted the atmosphere of the interview to reflect the context of interest as much as possible, since we could not physically situate ourselves in these virtual worlds. Also, having a computer present was helpful in the case that participants wanted to reference anything on their Facebook page during interviews.

Although most participants were younger than me, which led me to anticipate them being somewhat intimidated, nervous or shy, their demeanors were open, talkative, friendly and approachable. This proved to be essential, not only for myself, since I was intimidated by the undertaking, but for the overall quality of the interviews. Both parties were able to feel relatively comfortable, from what I perceived. Even Cindy, the international student from China, who spoke in a calm, thoughtful, stop-and-start English, was not put-off upon realizing the depth that I expected from some questions. She seemed outgoing and willing to try her best to answer my questions at length, which was more than sufficient to carry her

meaning and develop themes throughout the interview. Another interview was conducted in an empty classroom as a contingency plan to a scheduling mishap on my part. The participant, Laura, was okay with this change in plans and we followed through with the interview in the new location. The four interviews that were conducted over Skype went smoothly with only the usual problems of wavering internet connectivity and background noise, which were either ignored or solved with a bit of time and did not affect the quality of the interviews. I used my portable handheld recorder to record most of the interviews, with either my cellphone's built in recorder or that of my laptop as a backup. The interviews ran from approximately 40 minutes to a little over an hour long.

### **2.3 Audio Diaries**

Three participants agreed to create one-hour long 'audio diaries'. I had asked participants once the interviews were complete if they would be interested in recording themselves to further contribute to this project. The audio diaries consist of narrations of the participants' experiences while using social media for about an hour. They were recorded on the participants' smartphones or computers.

I wanted to minimize my influence as a researcher as much as possible with this method in order to better examine narrative themes in the social media context. I explained this method to the participants but only touched upon the core components, saying something like the following: "Record yourself for up to an hour as you go through your regular patterns of online activities. Narrate your experiences, any feelings or thoughts, out-loud as they are happening." This explanation was intended to provide the most creative freedom and the least imposition of narrative structure.

During recordings, participants could spend time on any social media site, such as Facebook, SnapChat, Tumblr, Instagram or Twitter. I tried to emphasize that they shouldn't feel self-conscious about saying particular things and that silence is okay too and that there is no right or wrong when it comes to the content. The most important thing was that they try to capture their 'internal dialogue' and what it is like in those moments.

One participant completed one audio diary file in one hour, while the two other participants created several shorter files comprising a set of recordings which, when compiled, amounted to about 45 minutes each. Because I failed to specify whether the audio diaries ought to be recorded in one sitting, two out of three opted to complete the task in multiple sittings. For one, this was due more in part to mechanical problems with their recording device. The other participant, I believe, was more inclined to participate in this manner as opposed to a longer period because of their schedule. One sitting would have been ideal, I thought, since deeper and perhaps less self-conscious content would arise over time as the participant grew more comfortable to the situation. However, since two out of three participants asked my permission if multiple recordings were acceptable, I decided it would be fine. Later on, in the analysis, this fragmented formatting preference would be seen as indicative of greater narrative trends amongst internet culture.

I not only chose to collect audio diaries to approach these participants as respondents, but also to explore the multiplicity of the narrative and social processes generated by the SNS interfaces (Papacharissi 2011). By relying only on interviews, there is the possibility that participants' stories would be skewed by what they think I, as the researcher, might want to hear, as well as by what the participants themselves think they should be experiencing (Levy and Hollan 2015). By studying these three audio diaries, I discerned more of the uninhibited patterns of how SNSs are navigated than I did through the interviews. I was able to see the effects that certain interfaces had on the narratives. I observed the differences and similarities in how the participants value various SNSs and apps and for what reasons. I also thoroughly examined how time is divided and managed in these informationscapes. Most importantly, by comparing the audio diaries to the interviews of these same participants, I was able to see contradictions and discrepancies in what they tell *me*, and perhaps themselves as well, and what they *do* and experience while online. Overall, despite having only three audio diaries, this method produced telling pieces of evidence for this thesis.

## 2.4 NVivo and Qualitative Analytical Aspects

Once the audio data was transcribed, I uploaded the transcription files onto NVivo, a coding and analytic software. NVivo works well with qualitative data because it lets the researcher highlight themes in the text and create categories, or ‘codes’, that can be counted and compared throughout all documents. For the initial analyses in NVivo, I read over the transcripts, paying attention to how the participants situated themselves in the environments of their stories. For example, I often asked participants about their cultural or family background as early on as possible in the interviews. When re-reading with NVivo, I would consider these background narratives first, as a lens through which different values and perspectives can be illuminated. Laura, a Mennonite student at the University of Saskatchewan, explained, “that’s a big part of our culture. My great-grandparents on both sides came over from Prussia. Well, some people say Mennonite’s a religion, not a culture, but—Mennonite religion—we didn’t really interact with other cultures that we moved to, so we didn’t really gain those cultures within ours. That’s a big thing. I think some people in our family stopped in the States and came over to Canada, but mostly then just to a farm, a little town farm.” Small background narratives like these are rich with evidence of personal and cultural values that helped me situate participants in their broader life-narratives – glances of which I aimed to ascertain in each transcript (Sermijn *et al.* 2008). I then took notes on patterns and themes, looking for emotional language, the participant’s self-awareness and awareness of the nuances of the SNS interfaces and commentary on social ‘events’ witnessed over SNSs. These could include posts of family and friends, or posts by or about celebrity, business or global news. I also looked for particulars in the language participants used to respond to advertisements and representations of others.

I coded small recurring themes within single interview transcripts and broader themes across all transcripts. I then compared the frequency of codes and their relation to one another. “Early opportunities,” “Internet,” and “School” are one related cluster of codes, for example. Another cluster involves many even smaller clusters which fragment and isolate themes such as “Space,” “Balance,”

“Economics,” “Real Life,” “Effort” and “Feeling” (See Fig. A.1 in Appendix A for All Nodes Cluster Diagram).

After the coding stage, I read all the material within the code categories I created. Every piece of text that I highlighted during the initial stage would show up in that code’s designated section in NVivo. This allowed me to re-read the broken-up text as a collection of expressions. Within each category, I would look for the strongest themes. These would be present explicitly as metaphors, phrases and repeated turns of speech, or more tacitly in the undercurrents of meaning across the narrative sections. Once I finished this analysis, I created more diagrams with NVivo to show word frequency and the relationships between themes across the data (See Fig. A.2 and A.3 in Appendix A for Top Ten Words and Word Similarity Diagrams).

I also relied on a small quantitative analytic component. After receiving the three audio diaries, I found that the manner in which these three participants narrate their online activities entails many broken-up segments. Since their pattern of switching narrative topics is very consistent, I felt this warranted a quantitative approach to measure how much time was given to each topic and how much time passed between leaving one topic and settling on the next. The latter, however, proved to be too microscopic of a measurement to be meaningful, so I abandoned that approach. To measure how long was spent on each topic, I re-listened to the audio diaries and noted the time when one topic began and when it was terminated. I converted these times into seconds per topic and collected the mean, median and mode from each set of audio diaries. Then, I calculated the average number of seconds per topic across all audio diaries.

## **2.5 Participant Observation**

I began this project with a personal understanding of internet culture, having grown up with the Internet and experiencing the kind of selfhood-building that social media enables (Papacharissi 2011). When signing onto Facebook in my ‘free time’ during this period of analysis, I would find myself hyper-aware of the types of posts that my Facebook ‘friends’ and I would make and to which we would respond.



I was more critical of my own reasoning for going online, asking myself questions like, ‘why now?’ or ‘why am I doing this particular action?’. Musante (2015, 252) describes participant observation as “a way to collect data in natural settings by ethnographers who observe and take part in the common and uncommon activities of the people being studied.” Person-centered interviewing and the audio diary methods did a lot to capture the tacit aspects of culture, however my own long history of participation and self-observation online took that further. While “explicit culture makes up part of what we know,” explains Musante (2015, 252), tacit aspects of culture “may not be directly observable and often remain outside our awareness or consciousness. Tacit knowledge may become embodied in the way we learn to stand, sit, move, modulate our voices, and perform—the day-to-day practice of living in a culture (Desjarlais 1992; Desjarlais and Throop 2011; Zahle 2012).” During analysis, I frequently relied on my own embodied knowledge of SNS practices – from the slouching in chairs, looking down while walking and other socio-physical mores of ICTs, to the bliss, frustration, numbness, inspiration and other emotional experiences of online ‘social networking’.

Although I was not observing the same individuals on Facebook as those who took part in this study when I went on Facebook in my personal time, I was observing my own network. I shared the same general embodied and mental tasks as those of my participants, for example, ‘friending’ someone, checking notifications, looking at news headlines, ‘seeing what friends are up to’. On some level, I found I could especially relate to my participants through shared feelings of oscillations between heightened boredom and exaggerated-yet-fleeting interest, as well as insecurities over the appearances of one’s ‘life’ as it appears online. I could also relate to their feelings of guilt toward certain social relationships that have been neglected and yet are still ‘near’ due to their ever-presence as one’s Facebook ‘friend.’ These experiences are central to social media use and would be difficult to explain or study without having experienced them first hand.

## 2.6 Reflexive Ethnography

Reflexivity is an approach to research of all kinds that acknowledges the researchers' connection to and influence over that which they are studying. Reflexivity can be broadly defined as "a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference" (Davies 1999, 4). The 'relativity of simultaneity' in the realm of physics and astronomy is one example of an applied theory of reflexivity, explains Davies (1999, 3). This theory posits that although two or more events may appear simultaneous, their apparent simultaneity depends on the location of the observer. Davies (1999, 3) uses this example to outline that by no means is reflexivity limited in importance to the social sciences and humanities. Even in "the most objective of sciences," concerns for reflexivity are "of fundamental importance" (Davies 1999, 3). It then goes without saying that for anthropological research, whose topics involve culture and fellow human beings, reflexivity is essential.

It can be argued that digital media are inherently reflexive. Lawrence Kirmayer *et al.* (2013, 168) explain that because of hypertext, which are highlighted words linking online readers to new webpages – "the structure of reading" has changed, "adding another dimension that allows trains of thought or associations to move out of the semantic frame of the phrase, sentence, paragraph, or larger narrative." Readers are thus enabled to create the narrative they desire. Textual media now interactively reflects us.

Furthermore, photography with the Internet adds another reflexive layer. Roland Barthes (1980, 92) calls photographers "agents of death" and that the photographer, according to him, is only "distractingly 'alive'." Photography expresses "a past that cannot be retrieved" (Bolter 1999, 111). The selfie exacerbates this as it requires the photographer to become an agent in his or her own symbolic death – a self-negation and echo-chamber of meaning (Maguire 2017). With the Internet, however, the past can be retrieved and its nearness and accessibility to the present play an important part in individuals' emotional and embodied states, identity and sociality. It requires a reflexive eye to understand the cultural norms, contexts and actions that make-up and inform a participant's experience and the full potential of meaning their digital content holds. Each participant in this study has a unique internet experience, not simply

because they are separate people, but because their social media content is tailored to them based on their browsing patterns. A reflexive ethnographic lens, therefore, was essential in the collection of data and observation, analysis and all other stages of research in this thesis.

### CHAPTER 3 THE INDIVIDUAL AND EMBODIMENT

In this chapter, the combination of autonomy and embodiment of internet culture are salient themes due to the growing extent to which ICTs shape daily routine. The more that digital and ‘smart’ technologies are welcomed into every private corner, the farther the scope and reach become of surveillance capitalism and its corresponding extraction and privatization. Hayles (1993, 69) warns of the interconnectivity of ICTs and writes that “each category - production, signification, consumption, bodily experience, and representation – is in constant feedback and feedforward loops with others. Pull any thread in the skein, and the others prove to be entangled in it” (Hayles 1993, 69). On the topic of the production of individual and gender identities in the Information Age, Martin (2000, 578) asks specifically, whether amidst these cultural shifts, “is there rising fear that the male self contains forces that are uncontrolled and irrational,” and, if so, does this cultural ‘realization’ perpetuate or alter gendered participation in the techno-mediated economy? Not only do shifts in familiar gender associations such as female/emotional/chaos and male/rational/order mark shifting patterns of embodiment, but they illustrate the power of global capitalism to select and assign value, as well as to predict and unilaterally profit from the manipulation of behavioural trends.

In this chapter, I present four cases to outline the embodied habits that can arise with ICTs. The first half of this chapter presents the cases of Trevor and Lisa who represent opposite approaches to managing their time and expectations with ICTs. The purpose of this contrast is to show the difference between users who are more technologically savvy and do not rely on large corporate media sites like Facebook and those whose are less informed about technologies and do rely on Facebook and other social media for their communications. Trevor and Lisa’s genders were not considered when selecting them for contrasting in this section and the presentation of these cases are not meant to perpetuate women-as-emotional and men-as-rational paradigms. On the contrary, the ethnographic cases in this thesis can simultaneously be read in light of Emily Martin’s (2000, 578) proposal that “the gendered associations with the realm of

entrepreneurial capitalism are in the process of a reversal: fearful loss of control that was seen as female in the 18<sup>th</sup> century has become redefined as male.” Though my participants do not directly take part in this culture as entrepreneurs, over the nearly 20 years since Martin proposed this, there may have been a permeation of these values into the emerging generations of tech-users. Therefore, Trevor’s widespread use of ICTs can also be characterized as ‘passion’ which, for him, is rewarded, while Lisa’s use of social media, though it is viewed as ‘rational’, is not rewarded, and she associates negatively with it.

Part one of this chapter also introduces the theme of autonomy, defined as “the quality or state of being self-governing [...]; self-directing freedom and especially moral independence” (Merriam-Webster 2019). Eighteenth century poet William Blake (2017[1804-1820]) speaks of autonomy in his famous lines: “I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Man’s; I will not Reason and Compare: my business is to Create.” The work of Veissière and Stendel (2018) in anthropology and psychiatry is also important here as it proposes that social media is not anti-social, as it is often framed in popular media, but rather hyper-social. “The *social* expectations and rewards of connecting with other people and seeking to learn from others,” they write, are in fact the elements “that induce and sustain addictive relationships with smartphones” (Veissière and Stendel 2018, 1). Therefore, while Lisa’s case demonstrates the ‘efficient’ approach to connecting socially and Trevor’s case demonstrates a more individual passion for techno-objects, it becomes clear that Lisa’s subjective sociality is being reified by Facebook while Trevor’s subjective sociality remains more autonomous from surveillance capitalism.

Part two in this chapter addresses themes surrounding issues of embodiment, efficiency and gratification with ICTs. LiPuma (2000), in his ethnography on modernity in Papua New Guinea, writes of how emerging technologies are experienced and how the changes they constitute are embodied, that is, absorbed into bodily and behavioural practice. “The question is,” writes LiPuma (2000, 8), “How does the advance of the modern change the very foundations of experience by reshaping people’s notions and categories of knowledge, the means by which they grasp their world and the conditions of its representation to themselves and to others, and the forms of desire appropriate to this new world?” The

participants in part two demonstrate that as new technologies become commonplace, the manner in which humans as integrated minds and bodies interact with such tools inevitably shapes culture and the ways in which well-being are enacted in daily life.

### **3.1 Part One: Autonomy and Well-Being**

Consumption is *not*, contrary to conventional wisdom, something that individuals do and through which they find enjoyment, satisfaction and fulfilment. Rather, consumption is a structure (or Durkheimian social fact) that is external to and coercive over individuals.

- George Ritzer (1998, 16)

The more that ICTs are adopted into our daily practice, the more these technologies shift how and what we communicate and what our bodies do during these processes. Over time, the steady integration and habituation of new tools and technologies shifts our embodied experiences and the language we use to make sense of them. Slowly, culture is changed through this cycle (Hayles 1993; White [1959] 2010). In this section, I contrast two narratives from the beginning of my interviews with Trevor and Lisa. These participants describe experiences of embodied social media use and embodiment which ultimately come to affect their general outlook on life and their well-being. Trevor is Canadian with an Eastern European heritage and his parents grew up in central Canada. Lisa is Indonesian-Canadian and her parents moved with her to Canada from Indonesia in 2003. Their stories represent two directions that internet use can and often does take.

Trevor is a younger Millennial than Lisa and a self-professed “computer nerd.” He uses ICTs as a creative and social outlet and his aptitude for communicating in these ways surpass what is usual for most Millennials. Alternately, Lisa grew up utilizing ICTs because they offered an alternative to expensive phone calls and slow mail. Like many Millennials, Lisa’s beginnings with ICTs did not involve learning about computer programming and internet technologies. Her level of technological proficiency met her needs for communicating up until adulthood, after her marriage and the birth of her child.

A large body of literature, old and new, on technology, society and psychology highlights much about the subjectivities of everyday life with social media and illuminates potential cultural pathologies involved

in the consumption of information online and participating in consumerism in this way (Adorno 1993[1944]; Chirkov *et al.* 2011; Choudhury *et al.* 2013). Chirkov *et al.* (2011, 1) explain “people’s happiness and well-being are inseparable from their experience of personal and motivational autonomy in pursuing freely chosen life-goals, actions, and behaviors.” Knowing “how to live in a world full of choices” – how to achieve true happiness – have proved problematic for scholars “since antiquity,” Chirkov *et al.* (2011, 2) argue. Looking back on the Protestant roots of capitalism, “the idea of an achievable happy life” was largely missing from popular teachings of that time (Chirkov *et al.* 2011, 4). Christianity prescribed “suffering” in the present to ensure well-being in the afterlife since the Church deemed humans “incapable of being masters of their own selves” (Chirkov *et al.* 2011, 4). With the Renaissance, however, this shroud of superstition was thrown off and concepts like dignity, virtue and personal responsibility reigned (Chirkov *et al.* 2011; Uyl 2003).

Most philosophers today, explains Uyl (2003, 34), regard autonomy as involving “some idea of self-governance and self-directedness.” This dates to seventeenth century philosopher Spinoza, who argues that humans are held in bondage by their emotions, or nature, which they cannot control (Uyl 2003, 37). Reason, creativity and “adequate ideas,” are the innate powers that drive humans from the channels of emotion, as well as those of external pressure and systems (Uyl 2003, 37). Many Millennials do not take a self-driven approach to ICTs. Users place themselves at the whims of emotion-evoking software, concealed by its common classification as entertainment, which inevitably guides users’ online experiences and rewards their sustained mass consumption of information.

Social media are designed under the pretence that most users are inexperienced with the coded inner-workings of online platforms, and indeed, these trade secrets permeate and make possible the ‘black box’ of surveillance capitalism that runs the Internet today (Zuboff 2019). Facebook’s closed design enforces feedback loops for users, which are perpetuated by a consumerist approach to entertainment – that we ‘just sit back and relax’. “For Spinoza,” writes Uyl (2003:38), “to be active is to be the source of our own

actions and not to be impelled by forces that are external to us.” This is something that is crucially tied well-being.

Trevor’s case demonstrates an alternative to the status quo of using social media. His knowledge of computing and software enables him to avoid depending on Facebook for communications, which raises the question of the significance of internet-based gaming for well-being and its link to surveillance capitalism. Lisa’s social media use, on the other hand, demonstrates the opposite of online self-governance, however, though she takes the seemingly logical route, the one that social media extend and encourage for all. The mass consumption of information is common on Facebook, as well as problematic (Krasnova 2013). Lisa’s prioritization of family and social ties has understandably guided her social media experiences and her narrative suggests a self that is torn in its reasoning and greatly influenced by the forces of familial- and peer-pressure, the interfaces themselves, and the resulting embodied strain. The following cases demonstrate the role and influence that ICTs play in the lives of two people and the effects that social media had and continue to have on them. It is seen that social media encourage and reward mass-consumption and entertainment experiences, thus dampening self-governance and creating situations that are more detrimental than not for users’ well-being.

### **3.1.1 ‘Trevor’**

Trevor is a 19-year-old student at the University of Saskatchewan. Even before I introduce the consent forms for him and me to sign, he is eager to tell me about the Facebook updates that he’s noticed and has been anticipating. “They’re redoing their mobile view,” he tells me. “There’s a couple profiles that have it right now but they have animated GIFs! So, they’ll take something off of Vine—say, you’ve recorded a seven second video, Facebook will automatically change it over to a GIF.” Baffled by his passion for something I have clearly taken for granted, I try to gently intercede with my first question, to no avail. “So,” Trevor continues, “it can go on your profile. Or, you can find another GIF online and then put it on as your profile picture. And then! You can also have temporary profile pictures as well. So you can put something up for, say, a week and then it takes it down after a week and then goes back to your old profile



picture.” He tells me he was informed about this via a news update and demo on Facebook. I ask him if this is something he would use. “It looked interesting,” he says, “I don’t know if I’d use it right away. I’d need to find something interesting first, and temporary.” He goes on to tell me that he would more likely use the temporary profile picture option if he ever has a profile picture he doesn’t “want to use permanently,” but still wants to share.

Trevor first started using the Internet in 2000, saying, that’s when “we got a computer,” referring to his family. At first, he mostly played offline computer games, noting that the Internet “was still this kind of rare...something, that we rarely used, because we didn’t know what to do with it at the time.” At around age 8 or 9, Trevor started “playing RuneScape with friends” – an online multiplayer fantasy role-play game. “I think I made my email account in 2007,” he tells me, “and I made my Facebook profile around that same time.” He continues without my prompting, “and, I guess that, the reason why we did that was just to keep in touch over—well, to make accounts, for one thing, to play video games online, and, also just to keep in touch with each other when we were outside of school, too. Because the chats on certain games suck. So we’d just message each other through Facebook.” Then, without a pause, he says, “Yah, and you know, I met my best friend through Xbox.”

“Really?” I ask.

“Yah. And, that’s why I flew out to Australia, to meet him for the first time,” he says intently, with an upward inflection on the phrase. I can tell he’s keen to talk about this more, and so I ask, “What happened? How did that all start?”

What follows is a lengthy narrative about long-term, international friendship and trusting parents, which I return to in the conclusion of this thesis. Now, however, I want to delve further into Trevor’s personal background with internet technologies.

At one point in his story, I ask him about the use of headsets for communicating over Xbox video games, such as HALO and Call of Duty, which are first-person shooter games that require an internet

connection. “I wear a full headset,” he says. “I’ve spent hundreds of dollars on those things. The one I use can go for like \$400.”

“Woah,” I say.

“Yah. And I can use my hearing aids too.” Just at this point I see that Trevor is wearing transparent blue hearing aids, which sit behind both ears. A couple of weeks prior to this interview, he tells me, he received a new pair of custom hearing aids.

“Do you take them—do you, what do you do with those?”

“Uh well, my hearing aids, I can answer phone calls with these, I can control my phone with it too, like, I have a little Bluetooth receiver here and I can listen to music as well. And I can also connect it to my TV and Xbox and talk to people.” He swiftly reaches his right hand to his right ear and removes the gummy-looking device and its blue backpiece from his head.

“When did you first get these?”

“Well these were just a couple weeks ago. It’s taken 6 years.” Surprised, I congratulate him and then he says, “yah well,” with the smallest scoff, “they were \$3000. And they custom fit for your ear too.” I mistakenly assume that Trevor has prior experience with hearing aids and ask whether these are “better than what you were going with before?”

“I didn’t have anything before,” he explains, “the reason why I switched over was because I couldn’t understand some of my professors.” He tells me that he’s had “ones with thicker accents” than he had in the past. “All my old professors last year,” he says, “didn’t have an accent at all. And then this year my math and physics professor both did. And that’s where I lose track of their voice. ‘Cause I can hear them but I can’t understand them. So, that’s what my hearing loss is, hearing, but not understanding. Which is, kind of hard for some people to grasp.”

“That is hard,” I say.

“Yah. It’s like I’ll hear someone talk, like I’ll be paying attention to you, but all of a sudden it’ll sound like, I don’t know, gibberish to me, when you say something. So that’s what these things help with. It

makes things a bit louder, but not too much.” Trevor’s hearing aids not only help in lectures but play a large and versatile role in his home- and gaming-life and he appears excited and very interested in showing them to me.

From an unconventionally early age, Trevor explains, he has been the designated tech person of his household. “I kinda became a computer nerd around 11 or 12. Like, I’ve never bought my own computer, I’ve always built my own. I always kind of control the Internet in the house. I have all the passwords, I can change them all.”

“You built a computer?” I ask, surprised.

“Yah, so I would buy the parts, put it together, put my software on it...It’s a lot easier than you think.”

“I don’t think it is!” I say. He explains that once he got an old computer from his aunt. He would “just take it apart and put it together for fun.” He would spend time “just playing with it, seeing if it worked,” until a neighbour who built computers taught him more. He describes his computer interests as being “more hardware over software.” Although, he remembers, “I built a game once, but, it was a little dinky one where you just jump over things.” Trevor is well accustomed to using a computer and considers as basic tasks the ability to use email, social media, games and a computer for work, tasks to which his parents are limited.

When asked how his experiences and knowledge of the Internet have changed over the years, Trevor explains, “I wouldn’t say I know everything about online, or computers. But, I know quite a lot more than what I did.” Now, “it’s a lot easier to use,” he says, “and you learn things through friends as well. There are still things that I don’t know everything about, like, certain games or certain websites, but for the most part it’s all...pretty much the same.” He goes on to describe a community platform that he hosts from his IP address, to which anyone in the world can connect.

“There’s this thing called TeamSpeak,” Trevor tells me, “which is similar to Skype, which I host off my IP address. All you have to do is download TeamSpeak and install it and then you go to the search bar, type in my IP address, which is my Internet Protocol—that’s where certain things get sent when you’re

playing online with me—and then it goes through my firewall, which I have an opening in, so I put a certain access—uh, certain ports are open, and that drags it to my computer rather than other computers in the house.” I listen intently as he continues to aptly describe the functions he uses to modify his communications online. He explains, “you also have a network IP, which is your IP address that goes to the outside world. When it comes to your household,” Trevor says, “anything that connects to the internet, has an IP—like, a local IP. And then so, I use my LIP, which is 139.6.33.79, from my computer. And then I put that in the firewall.” For example, he says, “you can type in 139.6.33.79 and that’ll give you access to your modem. You can sign in on there and then open up the firewall so it lets certain ports through. So then with those ports open, when someone connects to my IP address through TeamSpeak, it drags them onto my computer, onto my server.”

“Not to any of the other computers in your house?”

“No. Yah. So just the one computer. And then that is like Skype, so they can just chat with each other. I’ll have random people from Saskatchewan connect to it, I have random people from Australia, some people from the States. Like, it’s a local—er, it’s an open server, so it’s not private, so anyone can connect to it. We have random people connect to it at times.”

“How do they connect to it?” I ask.

“They just find it on a list,” Trevor explains. “There’s a list on the website for TeamSpeak [...] I am one of like three in Saskatchewan.”

When I ask, “Why would someone want to go connect to your server?” Trevor simply explains, “To see if anyone’s on there.” Someone might not “have anyone to talk to or play online with at that time, so they might want to see what these people are doing, to play with them.” He lists his group of gaming friends he met on HALO, who live in Australia. “I might sign [onto TeamSpeak] at midnight and they’ll all be on because they’ll just get home from school. And then they’ll be playing a game, and then some random guy could connect to the server, join, and say ‘oh, I’ll see what they’re playing,’ and then join in if he wants, or if they’d let him.” TeamSpeak, therefore, acts as a kind of “hub, to chat.” Trevor can set up

one of these servers—what he calls “the basics”—in about half an hour. Most of his communications with good friends are via Xbox and Skype, which he uses with headsets to communicate as opposed to typed messages. He uses Facebook Messenger on his phone because “it’s a lot more portable,” but only uses this to talk in group chats with local university friends or to talk to “everyone else who I don’t either game with or talk to on Skype.” Trevor approaches ICTs, including his hearing aids, with an all-pervasive passion and aptitude. He makes up no pretenses for his uses for the Internet: chatting live with friends, meeting new people and challenging himself in games or hardware are what he values most, and for him, ICTs provide those things.

### **3.1.2 ‘Lisa’**

Lisa is a 28-year-old student at the University of Saskatchewan. She, like Trevor, highly values her relationships with friends and family and approaches social media as a way to nurture her international relationships. Her first internet experiences were in the early 2000s at internet cafés in Indonesia. She explains that, back then, people didn’t have the Internet in their homes. “I basically used it for email. I knew nothing about, you know, any websites or other stuff. When we first moved [to Canada], I would just go to the library and use the computer there.” Her family didn’t get the Internet in their home in Canada until a few years after moving.

Lisa’s demeanor at the beginning of the interview is slightly shy but alert. She asks for clarification to make sure her Facebook page on the computer next to us is set up according to my instructions and we chat for a minute about what she is studying while we both sign the consent forms. I then ask her about what it was like to use internet cafés in Indonesia. She explains, “in the library there would be cubicles, and there would be one of those big computers, and you would pay, oh, I don’t know, you pay per 15 minutes or half an hour.”

“What were you using the emails for?” I ask.

“I guess when I first started—I have relatives from different islands. So, I would just contact them, and,” a smile grows on her face, “just trying to like, talk to them other than through the phone. I don’t

know,” she laughs. “Pretty much just...just to like, try to experience with this new thing, right? Like, email and the Internet, we’re like ‘okay, what is this?’ ‘I have no idea what that is.’ That’s when we’re kinda like, ‘oh, we can contact other people that’s like, far away from us instead of using the phone.’”

“What did the Internet mean to you then?” I ask.

“I guess it just introduced you to this one whole—you know, one new world. Since, especially, back then in Indonesia,” Lisa says, “phone is the only communication, and I guess letters too, but letters take forever to get to the people that you send it to. So, basically, phone is the only—like, the main—communication, um, thing, that we use. But it’s always so expensive.” With this, she looks down, as if reminiscing. “When we discovered email,” she continues, “the Internet I guess, it was a much better alternative for us. And yah, and then, I guess when we moved to Saskatoon, that’s when I discovered Facebook. And at that point, when I was first using Facebook, I had lost contact with a lot of my friends from back home and...” Lisa’s speech starts to sound welled-up in her throat. “Facebook just kinda like, um, you know, reconnected me with everybody back home. So it was a big thing for me.” She looks up briefly and her eyes water. I try to smile warmly, and she smiles back apologetically.

From the beginning, the Internet for Lisa was a necessity, both economically and emotionally, especially upon realizing Facebook’s potential to bring her friends and relatives back into reach. I ask her, “What was that like, finally?”

“Oh my goodness,” she says, “I was over the moon! I was so happy...to finally be able to talk to them again. ‘Cause, the same thing here, to phone them is just gonna’ take us a lot of money and we just kinda gave up, I guess, contacting them. But yah, when Facebook came along, that’s when we have more regular contacts with everybody.” Soon, Lisa started “following the trend.” She describes, “people would post, you know, like pictures or whatever comes to their mind, you know? And the first few years that’s exactly what I was doing.” As the years went on, Lisa stopped posting as much. “Basically,” she says, “when I sign onto [Facebook] it’s not to update stuff about myself. That’s how it’s changed. I hardly ever post pictures of myself or any pictures...anymore.” When she was younger, she posted pictures of herself

travelling, partying, “birthday or whatever, but now,” she says, “it seems like the pictures that I see are just like everyday stuff, like your coffee or your food. If I were to post something now, it has to be something super meaningful, otherwise, I don’t know...”

“Are you having less meaningful experiences now?” I ask.

“No, no, not that, it’s more like, people don’t really need to know.” She doesn’t feel the need to share ‘moments’ with everybody anymore. However, she admits, saying, “Okay, kinda embarrassed about this – pretty much, when I wake up that’s the first thing that I check. Facebook. But throughout the day, ‘cause I have school and work, we can’t really be on our phones whenever we’re at work. So basically, like, when I’m at work, it’s mostly just like, during breaks or lunches. And then at school, because it’s easier to use my phone at school, basically just, whenever I have a notification, then I’ll check it.”

Lisa grew-up with little use for computer technologies apart from sending emails. She only started using the Internet because it provided what we see now as a necessity of basic communication. It grew into something “that means a lot to us,” she explains, and its promise of bringing her loved ones ‘nearer’ posed no question as to whether Lisa would join Facebook and other platforms. As she’s grown up, however, Lisa has even stopped reading certain “peoples’ posts. I think it’s just too much.” Pictures are what mostly catch her eye. Throughout the day, she spends 10-15 minutes browsing Facebook here and there. “At some points I’m just so annoyed, I just skip everything.” Seeing peoples’ rants about politics or relationship problems really bother her. “Every time I see their name I’m just like, oh I don’t even care.” Lisa’s apathy and irritation now stands in stark contrast to her happiness when recalling the initial benefits she found of Facebook.

Now, much of Lisa’s attention online has been redirected away from communicating to loved-ones and back toward herself. “Going through my profile pictures,” she says, “the first few profile pictures I can tell you stories about them. And, I’ll be like, ‘oh yah, this is from when we went to Banff’ or ‘this one is when we...’ you know, there is something meaningful. But now, it’s more like, ‘do I look good?’ Even if I’m just in a bathroom.” She describes her thought process as, ““Oh, this one looks good! Should I use

this one for a profile picture? Sure.’ I think it’s just more like that. But I haven’t changed my profile picture in a long time.” Much of Lisa’s emphasis on presenting only ‘meaningful’ messages online comes back to the value she places on depicting her authentic self. This being her goal, it’s creating a feedback loop of second-guessing and judgement.

Some of her uncertainty stems from and feeds into what she considers a cooling-down period in her relationship with her husband. “When I first started dating,” Lisa says, “I would post a picture of me and my boyfriend and always like, you know, the happy moments. You know, stuff like that. But as—” she sighs, “I don’t know. I guess now, especially when you, let’s say you and your husband fight, I just kind of feel... kind of like a hypocrite. To publish something that’s like ‘we’re happy! We’re in love!’.” Lisa explains her and her husband take fewer couple-pictures as they did before but she still feels pressure to “portray” her life in a certain light online. At the same time, “I kinda have to think twice,” she tells me. She worries about whether she is portraying her happiness online in an exaggerated way and describes a looming anxiety of being called out if her online depictions at all stray from her “real life.”

Lisa has become hyper-aware of the status of images online. The written posts of others all seem to touch a nerve and prompt her to detach and care less while simultaneously scan pictures for signs of deeper meaning to which she can relate. This expense of time and judgement given to images reverberates through her self-judgements away from the keys, too, feeding the sense that her authenticity is receding, stifling her ability to decide on something to share or communicate. Lisa’s case depicts a cycle of anxiety and social pressure that many Millennials endure, which often results in deeper isolation. Her dissatisfaction with Facebook is temporarily justified by thinking, “my business is not their business. My personal life is not really for other people’s business,” and yet, the negative, habituated dependence on Facebook persists precisely because surveillance capitalism *makes* one’s private life their business by sustaining predictable behavioural cycles in users.



### 3.1.3 The Use of Technologies

Krasnova *et al.* (2013, 1) explain that while “the wealth of social information presented on Facebook is astounding,” it also produces “a basis for social comparison and envy on an unprecedented scale.” One facet of their research tackles “the role of envy feelings,” which they examine “as a mediator between intensity of passive following on Facebook and users’ life satisfaction” (Krasnova *et al.* 2013, 1).

Krasnova *et al.* (2013, 1) cite past research that has “linked consumption of social information on FB to such undesirable outcomes as jealousy [5], increase in social tension [6], social overload [7], isolation [4] and even depression [8];” however, they add, “the underlying logic of this dynamic is little understood.” Although sociality and contact with extended family are large components of Lisa’s case, the way that she enacts this facet of her well-being through Facebook is at once counter-productive, yet precisely how Facebook ought to be used, from Facebook’s perspective. By consuming massive amounts of social information on Facebook at numerous times throughout the day, users become more vulnerable to concentrated dynamics of upward social comparison, envy and isolation. Furthermore, these experiences prompt and encourage users to remain on Facebook.

Current research in psychology, anthropology and neuroscience tells us that sociality, both actual and virtual, is an innate, even *a priori*, quality of the human experience (Veissière and Stendel 2018). This approach taken by Veissière and Stendel (2018) works to unify evolutionary and neuroscientific understandings of reflection, reflexivity and sociality with anthropological observations on sociality’s more subjective facets. They claim that “a growing consensus between developmental psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and phenomenology strongly suggests that humans are almost always thinking about and *through* other people” (Veissière and Stendel 2018, 3). Veissière and Stendel’s (2018) proposal that social media are hyper-social not only elevates social media from the normally held criticism of it being anti-social, but in so doing, their explanation provides feedback on why these online environments become so detrimental for some individuals. If social media is in fact hyper-social, individuals like Lisa

who earnestly seek sociality can easily become over-exposed to and overwhelmed by the social pressures to which they are unwittingly subjecting themselves, not to mention the brunt of mass media advertising.

Images make up the primary ‘text’ of Facebook – not as much as Instagram, but not as little as Twitter. A cyberpsychology study by Taylor *et al.* (2017, 610), analyzes “the judgements people make of selfies posted on Facebook.” They found that by including a selfie on a Facebook post, “interpretations of message appropriateness, perceived poster narcissism, and social attractiveness” are altered (2017, 613). For example, Taylor *et al.* (2017, 613) demonstrate “that people are more likely to judge Facebook selfie posters to be narcissists than those who post messages without selfies.” Although selfies make up a fraction of the images that one encounters on social media, they force the reader into a reflexive and judgmental state. Lisa, in a sense, is aware of and reacts to this by critically examining her own selfie-posting motives, which results in anxiety and questioning. She tries to anticipate how others might perceive her posts and uses these estimates as grounds whether to post them. She also gauges whether her posts will reflect her ‘authentic’ self as opposed to contribute to a narcissistic or grandiose projection of herself.

Merriam Webster (2018b) defines envy as “painful or resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another joined with the desire to possess the same advantage.” Lisa, knowingly or not, caters to and empathizes with the grandiosity-envy dynamic on Facebook. By trying not to “make her life look better than it is,” for example, she avoids feeling guilty – that is, for trying not to become a variable in another person’s envy. This kind of constant exposure can cause “significant damage to users’ well-being and impact their life satisfaction” (Krasnova *et al.* 2013, 2). Moreover, since reading images-as-text is a multi-layered process from which meaning can be endlessly derived, Krasnova *et al.* (2013, 2) state, posting images “creates vast possibilities for impression management.” Despite the turmoil caused from the mass consumption of information online, users nonetheless justify their continued use.

### 3.1.4 Communicating Through Images

While Lisa participates on Facebook by looking at pictures and occasionally writing a short comment, Trevor primarily communicates to people online by speaking to them directly. Headsets and speaking-directly over the Internet not only allow individuals to communicate deeper meanings more effectively over long conversations with friends, but the very nature of hearing as opposed to seeing brings him closer to those with whom he exchanges words.

Making friends is a big part of well-being for Trevor and communicating in this mode brings a higher quality of care and attention to his relationships. Tim Ingold (2013) explains that sight is a large component of artistic production and, unlike hearing, touch or smell, it brings the visionary into the same realm as the close-up while keeping the seer separate from that which is being seen. “With hearing and touch, if you come close to something, then the boundary between yourself and the thing begins to blur and eventually dissolves altogether. You merge with it,” Ingold (2013, 72) explains; but with vision, “by contrast, if you are too close to something, you cannot see it.” In Trevor’s frequent and long conversations online, he speaks to his friends in an externalized voice, sharing a part of his embodied self with them through the vibrations which their ears receive. Furthermore, he internalizes the voices of his friends, experiencing them in an embodied way.

Conversely, Lisa’s case depicts social engagements at a distance as they are engaged with mainly visually. “And in this distantiation,” remarks Ingold (2013, 72), “lies the possibility for a kind of reflexive self-awareness. You do not just see but see yourself seeing.” For Ingold (2013), the distance allotted by vision is mandatory for artistic rendering or subsistence tasks like hunting. In this case, the separateness between the subject and object is necessary for the subject to portray, capture or negate its object. Much of the meaning-exchange that happens through images on social media, however, induce a reflexivity that is more conducive to judgement and questioning of oneself and, in turn, discomfort. Sociality is one of the most important contributors to well-being in the participants’ definitions. Ironically, quality-exchanges are what Lisa sought most of all in the beginning. For Trevor, gaming is entertainment and a creative pastime,

but his autonomous use of ICTs and the modes he uses for communication and the priority he ascribes to each ensure more quality in his actions which positively enforce his practice of well-being.

### **3.2 Part Two: Social Networking Sites as Tools**

The following two participants enjoy trying new things away from the keys – in nature and with new acquaintances. Jo and Cindy grew up, however, in two distinctly different consumeristic atmospheres. Jo is also five years older than Cindy. While Jo's embodied practice of well-being emphasizes proactively avoiding social media-as-entertainment, Cindy depends on social media as a means for creating social entertainment away from the keys. Both women understand that social media functions as a form of entertainment for some people; however, Jo values her time away from the keys more than the content she finds on social media, while Cindy uses the connecting capabilities of social media to organize her activities away from the keys.

#### **3.2.1 'Jo' and 'Cindy'**

Jo is a 26-year-old student at the University of Ottawa. Her family moved with her from Poland to Canada when she was an infant. Jo values 'traditional' communication skills, for example, visiting older relatives, talking to strangers in public and telling stories to people face-to-face. Although she appreciates ICTs, she does not use them in as habitual or practiced a way as does Lisa or Trevor, nor, for that matter, many of her own peers. She sees communicating with social media as "a reduction in one area and a gain in another" – a more pragmatic version of the understanding that social media simply increase your audience. She explains, social media "puts more emphasis on interaction with like-minded people as opposed to learning experientially and being open to interactions with strangers that might teach you something. It's limiting new experiences in a way because there're so many technical things in the background of these...algorithms that are connecting you to people." Jo tells me, "it brings everything you like near, near to you. It's limiting in knowledge-transfer on the ground but it's concentrating it, centralizing it into a...institution, the Internet." SNSs are often compared to fun-house halls of mirrors or

echo chambers, as they are immersive environments comprised of recapitulations of users' own interests and values.

It's not only in a value-oriented way, however, that Jo sees people limit their experiences by using ICTs. She argues, ICTs limit people in an embodied sense as well. In Jo's observations, ICTs make people less aware of their immediate surroundings. "Their minds are there," she says, "they're present, just not there...physically, wherever they *are*." When I ask her how she thinks people would be different without Facebook she replies, "I think they would be more polite in public."

"You don't think people are polite in public, right now?" I ask. Jo furrows her brow. She expresses concern toward people's habits today, saying, "they are always looking at their phones and that becomes a paranoia in some people and some people become stuck and they just can't even function normally anymore. They are just always thinking about their technology," she says, "and they are not looking around themselves or conscious of what's going on directly around them." Jo prioritizes her time away from the keys and from this vantage she does not believe that ICTs always make life more efficient.

When it comes to social media, what Jo sees, mainly, is the mass habitual consumption of information. "It's kind of like with [the film] the Matrix," Jo says, "where their bodies are in these tanks, but they don't know or care, they can't liberate themselves...because it's 'not efficient.' Like...for what? Efficient for who?" The culture of obsessive mass consumption of information is the most negative thing about social media for Jo. Social media and digital devices not only impact what and to whom we communicate, but they drastically affect our embodied habits of communication. In Jo's opinion, institutionalizing communication patterns in virtual spaces means we must rely even more on ICTs in our physical spaces, which, for Jo, disrupts the quality of embodied communication practices.

Alternately, Cindy grew up with a more limited scope of virtual worlds and what the Internet is able to access. She tells me about her early internet experiences and of making friends on Facebook when she first moved to Canada. In China, her father bought the family a computer which she used "to search some information from the Internet, like the news, but not too much social media. Nothing like that." After

school she would “play” her computer, but her parents wouldn’t let her “spend too much time on that,” she tells me.

“What were you playing?” I ask.

“Playing, uh,” she pauses to find the words, “I played computer games, very easy, simple computer games.” When she grew older, she bought her own laptop, “and um, and some new websites came up – Facebook, and in China we have Weibo and WeChat.” When she was 16 she began to use her phone to access social media – to “chat with my friends,” she explains, “and do some interesting things.” When she came to Canada two years ago for university, she took the opportunity to try Facebook, which is not allowed in China. She explains that perhaps the Chinese government is afraid to see “something not the truth. You can see a lot – uh, you can see a lot of news, like, against the government. There are so many bad news on Facebook. That’s something I don’t know, if the news is true or not. So maybe the government is afraid of, bad news. That’s my guess.” Considering much of the Facebook experience is news and entertainment related, I wonder what fills this gap on Weibo.

“Is there a news feed on Weibo?” I ask.

“No. And if there is the news on the Weibo, then some people – technology people – will delete it. At once.” The difference in entertainment and following the news on Weibo, Cindy explains, is that “you usually follow the celebrities, the superstars, like the business man. One of the very hottest stars in Weibo,” she tells me, “is the son of the richest man in China. He has a lot of followers.” Alternately, “on Facebook,” Cindy notices that people have “many connections to friends, to relatives.”

“Oh, so with Facebook you see more connections that people have with personal friends and relatives,” I say to confirm.

“Mhm,” she affirms. She tells me that in China, most of her friends only like to study, “very hard.” When they’re not studying, they do indoor activities. But, “when I come to Canada,” Cindy continues, “I have friends who like camping and fishing and go to Banff. Go to road-trip. I have several, uh, three, experience of road-trip. And these friends on social medium they, um, changed me.” Cindy had never

camped or enjoyed the outdoors in China, but she met people “on social media who like to go outside and go camping like that. They changed me to go outside. I don’t...” she stopped, seemingly at loss for words, then concludes, “yah, it really affected me.”

“Wow, nice!” I say.

“Happy. Yah,” she replies.

“How did you meet them,” I ask, “over Facebook?”

“Yah, Facebook. Actually, I don’t have too much Canadian friends on Facebook.” She tells me her Chinese friends posted about their experiences in Canada on a platform in her home state. On WeChat, Cindy adds “some friends who had been here four to five years, they have uh—their interests have changed by the Canadians. They like camping, they like—they changed by the Canadians. So, yah. I changed by them.” Cindy’s tandem use of Facebook in Canada and WeChat and Weibo in China prepared her for her stay in Canada by connecting her to other Chinese students in Canada who helped her experience new things in a new environment and broadened her range of experiences.

Although Jo similarly values new experiences, her approach to remaining open to new possibilities is to distrust the Internet and consumer-oriented information. As an older Millennial, Jo came of age with digital technologies like the Sony Walkman, CDs and flip-phones, whereas 21-year-old Cindy is coming of age with smartphones, touch screens and phone-internet data plans. Moreover, Jo considers herself to be “not very advanced, technologically.” She tried using Facebook on her phone, but it ended up costing her too much money. She doesn’t own a television or watch the news and, regarding the movies she does watch, she says, “I choose them very carefully, if it’s something I want to watch about, something that seems important to know about.” For her, Facebook is best for “communication with people that you know.” It’s easy, fast, and if the person she is trying to reach is “into it, into Facebook,” Jo says, she uses Facebook as a courtesy to them.

It’s not that the information she encounters online fails to interest Jo; rather, she proactively avoids seeking information of interest via social media. Jo acknowledges that, on one hand, Facebook can expand

one's comfort zone by allowing one to explore new things, "like music," she states. On the other hand, however, Jo believes Facebook reinforces one's comfort zone by mainly connecting them to like-minded people. This ties into the themes of autonomy and self-governance described in the previous section: it is up to the user to make the most of their experiences on social media.

Furthermore, Jo dislikes the language of efficiency associated with ICTs, as it does not value emotional expression or long-winded talking. She resists ICTs' call for her to rely upon them. "It's a conscious choice," she says. "It's basically a loop" what ICTs do to society, Jo says, "it feeds itself by making more people able to consume more frequently and getting products to people." She doesn't want to rely on a language of convenience and multitasking to nurture her friendships, a language she sees contributing so much to self-esteem issues. Although Cindy successfully used social media to bring her closer to people who shared with her new and fun outdoor activities, Jo treats "technology" as a monolithic object – a single, potentially-distracting other – rather than a nuanced field or necessity. Representing some of the older Millennials, Jo safeguards her practice of well-being by considering which embodied practices are neglected when relying on ICTs and which are perpetuated and at what cost.

Although Jo sees many negative aspects of allowing virtual worlds to dominate one's use of time, she sees positive embodied practices emerging due to social media as well. "Arguably," says Jo, "there is something to be said about other reasons for using Facebook and the resurgence in small organic farming, or the resurgence in interests in those types of practices, and people buying all kinds of great new alternative things that they don't see in the mainstream. It's a double-edged sword. It's good...a good tool." The contrast between Cindy and Jo's approach to social media outlines that despite their opposing patterns of use, they both value the attainment of quality embodied experiences, such as, extended face-to-face conversations, planned excursions and time spent with others. These moments are closely tied to their positive experience of community, their sense of belonging and, in turn, feelings of self-worth.

The feeling that one must stay connected to the embodied world of experience is a constant theme in both Jo's avoidance of social media and Cindy's reasons for relying on them. Both Jo and Cindy's



responses to ICTs, although opposing, reach a similar goal. They both value strengthening bonds between individuals in an embodied sense, whether it is being more considerate to strangers in public or making new friends and going on adventures. The seemingly endless possibilities for internet connection and information-sharing in Canada overwhelms Jo. She finds a balance between the actual and the virtual by mostly using social media for intentional communication amongst friends, not for news or entertainment. Cindy, on the other hand, grew up with a virtual environment that bans news and one that perhaps places even more emphasis on consumption than Facebook. Moving to Canada showed Cindy how much more personable social media could be in relation to Weibo, which helped her socialize in a new country and to have new experiences in nature. In both Jo and Cindy's case, the mass consumption of information – whether it be news or online displays of material wealth – is looked down upon as being unfavourable and something that doesn't contribute to their overall sense of well-being. For Jo, the presence of ICTs in consumer culture reinforces her understanding that well-being is qualitatively linked to her embodied self and environment – by avoiding too much online time she can reap these benefits. For Cindy, ICTs remind her that like-minded individuals may be easier to find than one thinks, also reinforcing the importance of quality social time and time in nature as constituents of well-being in consumer culture.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

While Trevor's case demonstrates social autonomy from the reifying feedback cycles of social media, Lisa's case brings attention to the 'will' of social media, in that, one's strong desire for sociality is turned into unilateral profit in the attention economy. Negative cycles of relating to social media and others are thus perpetuated. Throughout the interviews, Trevor associates positively with his ICT experiences even though they are far-reaching and constant. Lisa, despite her reluctance and detachment from social media, is more attached to social media's promised idea of sociality and associates negatively with her social media experiences. These cases demonstrate the negative impact of placing the onus on social media to provide users with feelings of connection and how passion autonomous from social media can perhaps supercede the latter's reifying impact and, in turn, reward users with a quality of social encounters.

Jo and Cindy's cases further demonstrate the scope of the autonomy and fluency required to uphold varying aspects of well-being. Both are aware of the coercive tactics of social media to guide one's virtual experience, and both take divergent paths to counter such fluency of surveillance capitalism. To get around the limitations imposed by Weibo, Cindy, once outside of China, made a Facebook account. She sees Facebook as a much less consumer-oriented and more personable SNS than Weibo, and immediately used it to make personal acquaintances with other Chinese nationals in Canada who introduced her to the outdoors. Jo distrusts the intelligence of social media and, therefore, strengthens her fluency at efficiently using the Internet to keep her contact with these environments brief and autonomous. In all, this chapter has shown that self-governance and the ability to act out one's own plan in the face of surveillance capitalism is essential for cultivating an overall sense of well-being with ICTs.

## CHAPTER 4

### SOCIALITY AND CONSUMPTION

Rebecca was an academic star. Her new book was on the phenomenon of word casings, a term she's invented for words that no longer had meaning outside quotation marks. English was full of these empty words – “friend” and “real” and “story” and “change” – words that had been shucked of their meanings and reduced to husks.

- Jennifer Egan (2010, 323-324) in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

The relationship that we as humans have to our external environment is virtually wrapped in language.

It is language's job to express, refer to and signify what we do, amongst other things. In one sense, language is the connection between our biology and the symbolic consciousness that makes us human – our body and mind (Chomsky 2011). However, language cannot perfectly overlay reality. In fact, discrepancies in language are an important facet of what makes a culture unique. In language, there are rifts and expansions of meaning which follow affect during times of rapid change. This presents like a lag in linguistic development as the flux of social and physical change reorders culture. In these events, it's important to investigate possible reasons why certain words have come to include certain meanings. These clues in language alert us to the directions of cultural change and guide us toward the best methods for adapting to a changing world (LiPuma 2000).

In this chapter, I present examples which demonstrate how Millennials define sociality, which is a very important facet of well-being as well as a contentious concept within anthropological discourse. In the following section, I provide a definition and brief positioning of 'sociality' within social scientific thought, as well as a brief discussion of sociality's relation to the virtual. The ethnographic cases in this chapter demonstrate that although SNSs are a 'useful tool' for sociality, there are detrimental consequences of attaining sociality in these ways. I approach this theme in the spirit of Marx's (1973, 84) view that a human “can individuate itself only in the midst of society,” and Martineau's (2015, 17) interpretation that “sociality therefore precedes individuality.” The evolutions of how 'being social' is perceived in consumerism contain red-flags of broader cultural pathologies and indicate modes of relating that can be strengthened within changing institutions and technologies.

#### 4.1 Sociality, Anthropology and the Virtual

For a long time, social scientists have defined sociality alongside broad, umbrella terms. “For example, culture, society, community – [which] have been part of the lexicon of social theory from the outset,” explains Amit *et al.* (2015, 1). In the collection called *Thinking Through Sociality*, Amit *et al.* (2015, 3-4) write, “the strength of this term [‘sociality’] lies in its open-ended invocation of process, in contrast to the emphasis on bounded and static social entities which is associated with terms such as ‘society’ or in a view of the social as a product of social interaction or relations.” Long and Moore (2013, 2) conceptualize human sociality as being able “to take many forms,” as sociality is more than the creation and existence of mere positive relations one has with others. Even while alone, humans utilize their awareness of others to think about themselves (Veissière and Stendel 2018). In this sense, sociality exists virtually – in the subjective-cognitive interior which is at once shared, co-created and based on external relations, yet autonomously held, accessed and interpreted (Hutto *et al.* 2018). This virtual-social matrix is used to think with even prior to an infant’s use of language – “in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other” – what Lacan (2006, 94-95) refers to as ‘the mirror stage.’ Sociality, thus, is an ontological, *a priori* facet of being human and plays an essential role in the definition of the self (Amit 2015; Chomsky 2011; Veissière and Stendel 2018).

The utter permeation of the social through intersubjectivities to autonomous cognition makes sociality difficult to grasp, let alone define (Hutto *et al.* 2018). Only a fraction of the experiences one has on social media are ‘social’, as the word is typically understood. Though, I align myself with current theories that propose that sociality is always ontologically and virtually present in the human experience, I emphasize the realness of the meanings that participants ascribe to ‘being social’ as well. Therefore, this thesis takes a pragmatic approach in the treatment of sociality as I consider the theoretical scope of sociality as well as participants’ understandings of ‘being social’.

After a review of current research, I decided not to use the term ‘virtual sociality’ to define sociality as it exists online because sociality, as argued above, is already virtual. Inversely, “online-mediated life,” state Veissière and Stendel (2018, 4), “is always, already real life, and as such, it is inherently social.” Furthermore, the urge to distinguish ‘real life’ from the virtual is not a new phenomenon, explains Rob Shields (2002, *xvi*), and “the virtual may be found in ritual, religious debate, in architecture and art. The digital virtuality of the Global Internet, simulations and virtual reality is only the latest incarnation of the virtual.” Indeed, writes Shields (2002, 2), “digital virtuality [...] draws on and repeats the historical forms of the virtual.” Memory is another important aspect of the virtual that has always played a social role, and future medical anthropological research might focus on the specific role that memories and virtuality play in well-being today with ICTs. Although I don’t define sociality in consumer culture by its virtuality, it is important to discuss both sociality and virtuality together.

In contemporary anthropological discourse, many attempts are made to remove hierarchical patterns of thinking about and valuating the human subject to avoid limiting conceptions of sociality, for example, by thinking it as primarily a human phenomenon. Long and Moore (2013, 1) refer to this as “the flattening impulse.” However, once all ‘anthropocentric’ meaning is removed from conceptions of sociality, Long and Moore (2013, 1) write, it “runs the danger of reducing human sociality to nothing more than the relationality between various beings or actants, or the transfer of affective energies between undifferentiated slabs of biological matter (Clough 2010; Venn 2010).” Though I do not necessarily define sociality by its ‘human-ness’, in this thesis, I am committed to “attending to the distinctiveness of humans,” as Long and Moore (2013, 1) put it, and I acknowledge that from certain theoretical perspectives this is considered anthropocentric.

Latourian and actor network approaches to sociality view “privileging language and representation” as threats to properly conceptualizing sociality, according to Moore (2013, 26). I do favour language and representation, however, given the format of my data: written transcripts of spoken interviews. Participants transfer affect and experience into English, which I synthesize with my experiences to create

more representations which I then represent in the English word assemblages that comprise this thesis. Since there is no objective ontological framework with which to explore sociality, I find it necessary to pay closer attention to the semiotics that govern our human-ness, seeing as human beings are the subjects of anthropology. Furthermore, I disagree with the ability to ‘privilege’ language and representation in the first place, as it assumes the agentic capacity of that which is being privileged, and it is precisely the question of agency – of immaterial symbolic structures and nonhuman actants, included – that is at hand when defining the limits of sociality.

Virtually, social processes exist in the minds of humans, unconfined to chronological time or space, as we envision social situations panning out, make plans and, in general, think about ourselves through the imagined perceptions of others (Long and Moore 2013; Shields 2002; Veissière and Stendel 2018). This broad use of the term ‘virtual’ is advantageous in anthropology because it rejects the notion of a rigid divide between supposed ‘real life’ and digitized virtuality by affirming the realness of many types of virtuality (Boellstorff 2008). Virtuality is something that humans *do* by way of abstracting representations onto parallel platforms or media. The virtual is also allegorical in the sense that it is dependent on the reflexive, interpreting lens of an observer. Furthermore, this makes virtuality and sociality particularly important and necessary to study anthropologically. As researchers and human beings, anthropologists are not only equipped to study but have subjective insight into ‘what it is like’ to be human (Nagel 1974). Going forward, it is crucial to take our internal ‘understandings’ of togetherness and continue to work toward externalizing them in theory and practice, applying them through medical anthropology to areas of innovation that will have massive impacts on well-being worldwide, such as robotics, prosthetics, virtual reality and software design and the myriad ‘smart’ technologies that will define our future.

Although the hardware for many virtual spaces are manufactured, the ‘hardware’ upon which human consciousness relies is not manufactured, *per se* – the ‘naturalness’ of biology being heavily contested (Long and Moore 2013). The embodiment of human consciousness is enabled by our ‘intelligent’ biology. This is fundamental to our use and development of language and sociality and proves a large hurdle for the

sciences dedicated to the reproduction of human-like sociality in ‘artificial intelligence’, or AI (Chomsky 2011). However, human subjectivity and intersubjectivities function similarly to software in the sense that they are ‘contained’ both centrally, i.e. on one computer system, or decentrally, i.e. across multiple systems that mutually, simultaneously back up the storage of new information. As argued by Ansell-Pearson (1999, 171), humans both contain and project systems that process and “cut across individuals (assemblages) and which transverse phyletic lineages and organismic boundaries (rhizomes).” Given this and its implications for sociality, some theorists “call for a dissolution of foundational distinctions between humans, animals, plants and objects” (Long and Moore 2013, 13). Taken even further, Ingold (1997, 249) argues, “there is no register that escapes the domain of our sensory involvement in our environment, no discourse that does not subsist in the process of our bodily dwelling. Thus, if some relations are social, then all are, and all life would be social life. What need have we, then, for a concept of the social at all?” However, this seems akin to claiming that everything is rose-coloured because one is looking through rose-coloured glasses. Though seeking objectivity is moot, exaggerating the potential breadth of human sociality equally does not help to distinguish between social and potentially non-social phenomena.

I use linguistic and representational data in this thesis for evidence of manifestations of sociality in psychological, cultural and physical realms. On a practical level, I use tropes, metaphors and participant narratives to guide me to the areas of meaning that are deemed valuable and relevant in consumer culture. These are demonstrated on an analytical level by their prevalence as themes in the data. As the researcher, my own experiences of the methodology as well as my whole life are entangled in the exchange of representations that comprise this thesis. It is a shared procedure of thinking through sociality that can be magnified for each person involved, like nodes that tie together intersubjective experiences. As Long and Moore (2013, 4) explain, sociality is “a dynamic relational matrix within which subjects are constantly interacting in ways that are co-productive and continually plastic and malleable.” Furthermore, navigating between the actual and the virtual is not only limited to SNS use, but is a function specific to sociality. It is

this propensity to think through the virtual and the social that is being exploited by the attention economy of SNSs.

#### **4.2 ‘Keeping in Touch’ and ‘Seeing Where They’re At’**

This section explores the boundaries of what constitutes ‘being social’ on social media by contrasting the metaphors ‘keeping in touch’ and ‘seeing where they’re at’. The former is a metaphor that comes up regularly in early research on SNSs and ICTs (Ellison *et al.* 2011; Kaye 2011; Tacchi 1998); however, in the data of this thesis, it appears only periodically. Alternately, ‘seeing where they’re at’ is significantly more prevalent. Although the two phrases share a “a common horizon of meaning” – a term Martineau (2015, 11) uses – the frequency of ‘seeing where they’re at’ indicates a breaking away from the pre-Internet world when, perhaps, metaphors of ‘touch’ and being physically near did more to convey interactions like speaking on the phone or writing in chatrooms.

In their recent study, Veissière and Stendel (2018, 7) argue that “the desire to socially connect is an even stronger motivator of smartphone use than the desire to do better than others.” In my analysis, I broke down the concept of social connecting across three main narrative themes: communication, connection and staying updated. Within these themes, the top five most frequently used verbs are, ‘to see’, ‘to talk’, ‘to get’, ‘to feel’ and then, ‘to connect’. ‘To see’ is used 74% more often than ‘to connect’ to describe actions and motivations within the context of communicating, staying updated and other social connecting online. This indicates that Millennials value this metaphor of sight more than metaphors of feeling, such as ‘staying in touch’. One of several reasons for this may be that Millennials feel disappointed with their ‘connecting’ experiences over social media. Given language’s co-evolution with technologies, the trope ‘seeing where they’re at’ is selectively replacing outdated tropes like ‘keeping in touch’ or ‘staying connected’, as it may more accurately convey the distanced subjectivities involved in social media relations.

The frequency with which participants are motivated ‘to see’ where people ‘are at’ might indicate that social media provide them with a kind of beneficial sociality. However, upon closer inspection of social



interactions on social media, elements of participants' sociality appear to differ from their understandings of what it means to 'be social'. As mentioned in Chapter One, consumer culture leads us away from valuing a sense of cultural historicity, which is vertical, linear and values hierarchies (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Internet culture gives rise to new economies and practical and systemic abilities which flatten and sprawl processes that were once far more delineated and hierarchical (Choudhury *et al.* 2013; Higman 2017). The internet culture phrases 'staying connected' and 'staying in touch' speak to the comfort of having someone within reach. Though it has given way to a more predominant 'seeing where they're at', both phrases reflect the current horizontal and spacial intersubjectivities of consumer culture, where everything is brought to one's fingertips and friends and strangers are no more than a glance away. While many theorists discuss how the Internet and globalization have instilled this cultural flatness or horizontality (see Friedman 2005), Higman (2017) illustrates that a high value of 'flatness' is implicit of the Anthropocene experience. "'Manufactured' or 'artificial' flatness," Higman (2017, 8) writes, is "at the center of the everyday experience of modern life" and humans "install flatness as a permanent condition" to "inhibit natural processes of change." Flatness, Higman (2017, 9-10) argues, is at once

highly desired yet frequently disparaged [...] On the one hand, 'flatness' indicates smoothness, evenness, levelness and predictability, all useful characteristics that facilitate movement and activity, things that contribute to social and economic efficiency. At the same time, it identifies corollaries such as monotony, homogeneity, sameness, emptiness, absence, lack, insipidity, dullness, deficiency, tedium, boredom and even deadness.

As SNSs encourage a high valuation of 'seeing where they're at', this existing flatness is made even more remote by sight, as discussed in Chapter Three. With SNSs, the horizontal and networked reach is brought into increasingly tighter nodes upon the individual as a higher degree of virtual sight makes accessible increasingly more information, that conveys almost an implosion unto the individual.

Some participants of this study embody a networked self that is overwhelmed by the internalizations of 'the other' (Bourdieu 1977; LiPuma 2000; Navarro 2006). The horizontality of SNSs brings awareness and language to reflexivity. One participant, Laura, demonstrates this by suggesting that social media "opens you up to certain things" and "it opens up my eyes." Laura adds, "maybe it's a good thing, to have

it, and be aware of interpretations of yourself.” At the same time, however, these states of awareness can become recursive and fixate participants on the perceptions that others may have of them, which consequently, directs them back to their own self-image. Not only do targeted advertisements and the Facebook interface reinforce this type of individualism, but so too do aspects of what most participants consider to be ‘social’. Thus, while individual selfhood is strengthened, strong oscillations exist between that and hyper-individualism, even within the participants’ understandings of sociality.

#### **4.2.1 Interfacial Issues - Individuation**

Friedrich is a 26-year-old Canadian who emigrated from Latvia with his parents as an early teen. He appreciates being informed of major changes in the lives of his friends from back home, as well as being able to communicate with them in detail. However, the Facebook interface, he argues, does not cater to this. He finds solace on other sites which, in his opinion, are better equipped for sharing long, original stories amongst users. The problem for Friedrich is that most of his friends use only Facebook and they don’t often generate their own content. On top of that, the posts that they do make are addressed to a collective of their ‘friends’. This creates a situation that is at once not personal enough for Friedrich and too individuated.

In early chatrooms, Friedrich remembers, “there was no economy involved. No advertisements.” Now, the current consumer-economy online works to alienate and reify user relations from a direct, textual form of collective discussion. On Facebook, “you can either post an album of pictures, or a little text, or a link, or a link to video, not much, you know, past that.” Alternately, Friedrich reminisces on his old chatroom experiences and asks me to imagine a discussion

where you see messages coming in from 50 different people, and like, only so many of them are sent particularly to you. But there could be like, two, three, four, five, like *big* general discussions going on with a lot of users contributing to them simultaneously, and you’re seeing all of it on the same screen. Happening in real time. Talking. Like 50 people talking. That’s intense. Now, do we talk so much online? No, we don’t. Unless, unless! We’re chatting with a particular individual. Or two.

A platform like Facebook, Friedrich maintains, “wouldn’t allow” people to communicate as freely as what he just described “because of its format...Because it’s not what the Facebook website is for.”

Friedrich articulates a position which is not necessarily opposed to the services that social media offer, however, he does not consider communication which truly benefits his well-being to be a central facet of his Facebook experiences.

The Internet provides many people with a means to emotionally and virtually bridge themselves to their homelands. Friedrich’s early internet experiences were with a Russian-language chatroom in Latvia – “where a lot of young people from my hometown used to hangout online, just talk about stuff. I used to spend a lot of time on that,” he tells me. According to Friedrich, Facebook’s interface does not prioritize meaningful communication in the way that early chat-rooms did, which, he says, prioritized discussion above all else: “You had a nickname and a little tiny avatar,” but you could not upload a picture of yourself. The idea was only to message people, “either to the general public or to some person. There wasn’t a thing that resembles the Facebook wall. That wasn’t a thing yet.”

“The kind that scrolls down?” I ask him.

“Yah, it had everything the social networking site needs to have except for that scroll down feature that we’re all hooked onto now.” Eventually, chatrooms became more individualistic with less emphasis on the communicative commons. As the site changed to accommodate adding user pictures and profiles, there became “more stuff to do” besides just talking, explains Friedrich. “It got more personal, like you, you could create your virtual image there.” For Friedrich, this was the beginning of the problem which threatened quality communication online.

In the past, “for people to get an idea of who you are, you had to say a lot of stuff and you had to talk for hours, and the constant users spent a lot of time on that, in that chatroom.” Virtual rewards and rankings were given to distinguish prominent users, such as, “‘100 hours achieved’ and ‘1000 hours achieved’...spent in the chatroom, talking, and that was the only way to communicate with people.” In a similar vein, another participant, 24-year-old Jacob, says, “Facebook is a shitty place to look for shit on,

because you inevitably just get redirected back to your own private part of it.” Again, an acknowledgment of the drawbacks of an egocentric platform which, by ‘privatizing’ the communicative commons with profiles, fragments the once thorough online communication patterns of these Millennials.

Jacob is a Canadian who lived in Australia with his family for a few years until he was nine years old. When he came back to Canada with his family, MSN Messenger – a pre-SNS similar to a chatroom – was the highlight of his home-internet use. The Internet was “something that we all fought over,” he says of the dynamics between his two sisters and himself – “like, physical violence.” His mom made them a chores-and-internet schedule which rotated time slots between the siblings, giving each a chance at two hours per night.

“What would you do for two hours on there?” I ask him.

“Fuckin’ MSN Messenger. Like, the whole time,” he says, laughing, “just like, chattin’ with my friends.” At that time, Jacob says, “no one had cell phones, you know. You call their parents’ landline and talk to their mom and ask for them,” he laughs. “So, you had no way of talking to friends after school and all of a sudden, MSN comes along and like, it seems like now people just take it more for granted but, I remember that was just like, the bees-knees. Like – now you can talk to friends.” While Messenger allowed kids to connect on their own terms and evade parental intermediaries, it also worked against the authority of the family unit, and children were able to further bypass interactions with the families of their peers while remaining separate, at home.

Nowadays, Jacob says, “I see [social networking] more as a tool than, like, something I need to *do*, because, strictly speaking, social networking isn’t the only way to talk to your friends now, you know?” Unlike other participants who have emigrated, Jacob does not fully rely on SNSs to stay connected with friends. “I see a lot of them in person,” he says, “and like, I could call them or I could text them. So, it’s like a marketing tool. That’s kind of how I see social media now.” While Friedrich suffers from Facebook’s inadequacy as a social platform, Jacob is more neutrally affected yet nonetheless notices the same individuation.

Facebook is a controlled environment wherein interacting with its interface in any way produces the commodity of data. Given this, Jacob and Friedrich's individuation can be interpreted with Marx's notion of reification – a sub-category of alienation specific to capitalist societies (Martineau 2015). Martineau (2015, 16) explains that "reification refers to the systematic transformation of processes and relations into *things* [...]. In short, in capitalist societies, the relations between producers appear as relations between commodities." Friedrich avoids this dynamic and resents Facebook for the self-estrangement he feels whilst trying to meaningfully *share*, while Jacob's perspective to approach Facebook as a marketing tool enables him to try to benefit from this dynamic. Nonetheless, Millennials have opened the definition of sociality to a grey area of passive and non-contemporaneous human engagements that social media has enabled, commodified and manufactured.

#### **4.2.2 Networked**

Laura is a 22-year-old student at the University of Saskatchewan. From a Mennonite family, she was home-schooled and only used the Internet to communicate with her friends and relatives while spending half the year in the States with her dad. She made a Facebook profile in 2008, at age 15, "and then kinda forgot about it," she says. Laura tells me that she usually just spends about 30 minutes per day on the Internet. In her observations of most people, she feels "it's somehow weird now for people to stand and not do anything. You know," she says, "I feel like that's a--" she pauses to laugh, "a big culture thing now. It's weird if you're standing around *not* on your phone." In physical space, people isolate themselves from each other with their preoccupations with their phones, as discussed in Jo's narrative in Chapter Three. However, in their virtual spaces, people are networked. What appears contradictory in English is actually a perpetual cycle of networking that creates isolation, which merits further networking.

In the last year, Laura has seen Facebook fill up with more ads and people sharing 'stories'. "It gets so convoluted," she says, "none of this is actually *about* any of my friends, it's just media and advertisements." This makes her annoyed and disinterested. "You're just kinda scrolling through," she tells me, "not paying attention, because none of it's personal." Laura's interpretation seems to oppose the

hyper-personal depiction Jacob and Friedrich give. However, the same mechanism which Jacob and Friedrich lament – an egocentric profile interface – is what makes the Facebook experience so impersonal for Laura. From Friedrich and Jacob’s perspective of seeking out information from businesses and ‘friends’, one inevitably gets rerouted back to one’s profile. When Laura says, “none of this is actually about any of my friends,” she remarks on the information brought within her virtual-self boundary. While observing the ‘stories’ coming in, she feels it’s impersonal because most people create or share general posts to no one in particular. At the heart of these linguistic contradictions are differing perspectives affected by personal and social autonomy on social media.

On one hand, Laura values the potential of social media to “[open] your world in some ways,” and says, “I try to use this to see stuff about my friends.” While on the other hand, she describes the downside to this access as a loss of control: “I just kinda wish that I could have more control over what I’m seeing.” Furthermore, it’s not just control over what *she*’s seeing that is important to Laura, but maintaining control over what others see of her. Such control is integral to her valuation of awareness, openness and respectability. “Facebook makes you more aware of your appearance—or what you’re portraying to other people, within your profile pictures or your statuses or whatever. I always try to keep it real,” she laughs, “and not worry about it too much. I think it makes you think about appearance, and portrayals and what people are thinking of you. I try not to let that affect me too much, but I mean, it’s *creating* that though, it’s making you think about it.” This demonstrates the reflexive, recursive aspect of networking which turns the gaze back upon the individual.

How one portrays oneself is a central aspect of social networking. Jacob tells me that, of course, “you wanna look cool, everyone wants to think they’re cool” and “at the end of the day, you are projecting yourself out there.” When I ask him how he knows whether “it’s an honest representation” that someone puts forth, he replies, “people don’t want to project something totally different from how they see themselves. But, it’s honest in the sense that people see it and they identify with it, so it’s gotta be honest a little bit.” This raises several questions regarding ‘authenticity’ and how and who determines it.

Furthermore, can the nature of the self be simultaneously singular and multitudinous and does this vary according to the environment within which the self is being perceived?

When I ask Laura if she feels, perhaps, if Facebook depicts a “fragmented version of yourself,” she explains, “I would say maybe it’s a more fragmented perception.” Although much of using social media is about managing appearances, on a deeper level, it is about managing the multiple perceptions that *could* be had of oneself. I tell Laura, “it sounds like yours are, um, very oriented toward the positive. How do you keep that up? I mean, it’s kind of a hard question,” we share a laugh, “but,” I say, “I want to know more. What is your mental state when you’re just trying to ensure that people do think of you like that?”

Laura says,

I guess people originally get that thought, I like to think, just for [me] being me, you know, acting—well, I mean—I’m not a perfect person, but generally, I feel like I’m a fairly good person. So, when people witness that they hopefully get those positive perceptions. Which I strive for. And then to manage that, or keep that...I’m aware of whenever—like I said, I’m not perfect—so whenever I do things that would be considered wrong or bad, you know, I *don’t* maintain some peoples’ image of me.

Away from the keys, Laura acts proactively to avoid these situations by not posing for pictures while drinking with friends, for example, because “99% of the time people post them and I don’t want that. So that, in a way, is me managing it, you know?” Within Facebook’s virtual space, as well, Laura manages the divergent perceptions that could be had of her by refraining from making political commentary: “It’s just that everyone has such different views and I don’t want them all of a sudden – a person that I’m a friend with – to see something and then have a negative image of me. So, I’d say generally, I’m more aware of that kind of stuff than a lot of people are, but all those ways are me managing those perceptions, or um, ideas people have of me.” In all, the primary communicative form of SNSs is the image and with it, sociality has shifted from an emphasis on the communicative commons to the individual and how that individual appears. This also relates to the human desire to monitor others and be monitored by them, which I discuss more in Chapter Five. Laura not only understands the extent to which she is being

individuated by SNSs, but she uses this seemingly unavoidable stage as a platform to demonstrate her ‘goodness’, regardless of whether this is urged on by her fear of appearing otherwise.

### **4.3 The Desire for Friendship Manifested Online**

Friedrich tells me that he uses Facebook “to share my art with people. I have to show it to somebody because, why—,” he hesitates, “not why else, but—I have no idea *why* I’m doing it, but *while* I’m doing it, I might as well share it with people and with my friends especially.” Although, to some, this could mean marketing, for Friedrich, it is not economical but merely the best way for him to maintain a sense of meaningful contact with his friends and share with them his creative products.

When Friedrich began using Facebook, he was “really, like, hoping to...get something from it,” he says. He describes it as looking for something: “I was looking, I was scrolling through that wall and looking at the stuff that people post, trying to find something good and I couldn’t.” He was interested in his friends from back home and wanted to “get in on the good stuff that’s happening in their lives somehow and get involved.” Perhaps his hopes were too high or, specifically, at all dependant on the necessary requited participation of his friends. “Overtime,” he continues, “I understood, obviously, that none of that is there on Facebook. It’s just a bunch of bullshit and people posting crap. It’s boring and it’s stupid and none of it is interesting and it’s always the same, every day is the same.” Friedrich found himself becoming “much less involved” with Facebook, stating, “rarely you see something that you like, like nice pictures of your friends. And that’s all – sometimes you see it, it’s nice...that’s all there is.” Facebook’s incapacity to satisfy Friedrich’s desire for friendship echoes into his life away from the keys as well, in the form of an emotional resentment for this platform and its perceived role in Friedrich’s diminished friendships.

Throughout our interview, Friedrich explicitly acknowledges both Facebook’s “positive sides” and its addictive properties, including his unwillingness or inability – “I’m still hooked” – to quit Facebook. He is aware of this negativity, however, and the degree to which his sentiments may come across as complaints. Toward the end of our interview, he tells me that I should add another question to my interview guide:



“You might get an idea that I have this negative view of Facebook and what it does and what it's like, and an overall negative view and that I don't like Facebook. No, that's not true. And the question should be something like, can you describe the positive sides of Facebook—” he interrupts himself with a laugh, adding, “if you see any there?” He reasons with his previous comments, noting, “because I can. And I could, I think:

Facebook did, uh, a big, big job in bringing people together and it is still doing it and it's going to keep doing it for years to come, hopefully. It is bringing people together. It's bringing friends together. Like, me and a lot of my friends, we are unable to get together in real life because we live on different continents. That's the reality. And we can talk and share parts of our lives to each other via Facebook, like, with pictures for example. And I think it's very nice. I think it's very pleasant. And a positive thing overall.

Despite his personal experiences with Facebook, Friedrich demonstrates he understands what Facebook does to “show people that we're not that different. We don't have that much to fight over, like, there's not that much reason for any fighting or arguments between us because we are very similar. We have similar interests. And there *are* things that are capable of connecting us and bringing us together in one place.” I did consider and include questions like this in subsequent interviews, which added to the informant-oriented questions in my guide. In his response, Friedrich informs me of his perceptions of the ‘positives’ to Facebook. However, as a respondent, his mention of pre-emigration friends and life are interspersed with resentful or saddening statements – despite his use of Facebook to mitigate this sense of loss and distance.

Jo, who is the same age as Friedrich, explains that social media is now “less about meeting friends in that way, but, it's easier to keep tabs on acquaintances so that in the future, if you do become friends it's really easy to do, to stay in contact.” Somewhat embodying the tautology that Safire (2006) claims marks popular Millennial sayings like ‘you do you’ or ‘it is what it is’ – Jo means, Facebook is good for staying in touch, so that if two people become closer friends, they can stay in touch. Also, Jo is one of the participants who favours the trope of ‘keeping in touch’ and seldom uses ‘seeing where they're at’ in her approach to friendship online. Perhaps this approach in one sense mitigates the feeling of having too much

distance. Jo's shifted expectation of friendship online and her perception of the function of social media accommodate a more remote and atomizing sociality while it does not resent ICTs and nonetheless assigns them a purpose in her social life.

Katy, a 24-year-old working college student in Calgary, tells me that she started using the Internet at around age 13. She "didn't really understand any of it" or "use it for anything purposeful." However, she adds, "within that year when I turned 14, we started using a social media website called Nexopia." This involved "rating faces, like 'is this person good-looking?' or 'is this person not?'" Eventually, Katy says, Nexopia "morphed into not-reading people and you just had your own profile." Comparable to Friedrich's experience of the decline of the chatroom layout, Katy says, "that was kind of interesting 'cause it was the beginning of our individualization, I guess – of the self on the Internet." By "our," in my understanding, she refers to her high school cohort. "It was like, 'how do I project myself?' and 'what side of myself do I want people to see that would make me look cool?'"

I talk to Katy over Skype from my laptop on my kitchen table. "Growing up, what did the Internet mean to you?" I ask.

"The internet was a place where I could get away from what was happening in the real world," she responds. "When I was younger, I was fairly rejected by everybody around me, especially when I was 13 and 14." MSN Messenger helped her to "try talking to people from school," and "kind of experiment with my communication skills, or, my courage." Despite feeling rejected, she says, "I really liked just going on there and talking to people, and I never really realized how dependent I was on it until...right now." With this, she laughs heartily.

"Why is that?" I ask.

"Thinking about it," Katy says, "I was really comfortable just to go to my room, download music, talk to people on the Net that I knew – barely – and just, like, sit up all night. It was my, comfort thing. Instead of going out and playing video games at someone else's house, I just stayed in my room alone," she laughs again, with a warm smile.

“How did you feel about it at the time?” I ask.

“At the time it was secure—like, it felt secure. I felt, like, once I could get to my room, and get the computer on, the world goes dead, and I felt good. It felt alright.”

“Is it different, how you think about it now?” I ask.

“Yes. Yeah. The Internet became something really impersonable [sic]. My mom made sure that when I was on the Internet, that I was only talking to people that I for sure *knew*. As I got older and things started changing, especially with Facebook and Instagram, things really started to become very impersonable, and that’s why I don’t like it anymore.”

While Katy describes her younger self as being unsure of her friendships away from the keys, it was as if connection was something she could be sure of online. As chat interfaces changed and she and her peers grew up, Katy says, now, on SNSs “you don’t have friendships. People don’t really have deep conversations over MSN Chat anymore, there’s no, depth.” I wonder the extent to which people might use changing technologies as scapegoats for the deterioration of some childhood relationships as one approaches adulthood. I ask, “Could it have anything to do with the age you were—that it seemed like there was more to say back then?” “Definitely,” says Katy. When she was 15 or 16 years old, she says, “I liked going on Facebook and putting my status up for whatever. Like, it was, because, maybe no one was listening in real life, that it was the one way to project my feelings.” However, she adds, “nobody probably cared, it was still like that instant gratification that I got the feelings out and at depth. And I think that still carries on today, a little bit,” Katy says while laughing at herself. There may have been more to say and less responsibility outside of socializing as a young teen, however, there is another side to Katy’s sentiments. Besides the evolving interfaces and maturing intersubjectivities, the potential for being recognized is a constant in her experience.

Katy acknowledges that the nature and form of her conversations with people online have changed. Perhaps there became more incentives outside of being social that drew Katy in as a user of SNSs. While this rationale accounts for the non-social and addictive ‘will’ behind the design of SNSs, it then

perpetuates the notion that social media are anti-social. The overarching incentive of being seen or, more subtly, being affirmed, in a friendship resides in a grey-area between internalized and externalized sociality. SNSs, when viewed instead as ‘hypersocial’, can be seen to exacerbate internalized social processes by enabling these already virtual processes and displaying them externally (Veissière and Stendel 2018). This corresponds to an emerging sociality that is more remote, operating at a distance from others. This is also indicated by the rise in explanatory power and frequency of use of the phrase ‘seeing where they’re at,’ as covered in the first section. Sight as a main sense for sociality means less embodied impressions – where a huge distance can be covered subjectively, yet, having an object too close weakens this sense and obscures the other from view (Ingold 2013).

The mental state that thrives on knowing that others are at once not actually present but virtually near introduces the conception of one’s own ‘visibility’. The social rehearsal theory of cognition in psychology posits that “humans are almost always thinking about and *through* other people” (Veissière and Stendel 2018, 3). This would position sociality, like language, as something that is primarily used in cognition and secondarily enacted or externalized (Chomsky 2011). Katy’s use of social media as a mode of experimentation for social experiences she wishes she could have in real life supports Veissière and Stendel’s (2018) analysis of social media as hypersocial. While Katy seeks to enact her sociality online and have it carry to her relationships away from the keys, Friedrich seeks to share the products of his creativity with friends online with whom he’s already had embodied social experiences. He desires deeper connection than what Facebook can provide and, in essence, is not seeing himself adequately reflected in his SNS interactions.

Veissière and Stendel (2018, 3) state, “from context to context and moment to moment, we outsource a large part of our thinking, feelings, and decision-making to sometimes explicit, most often implicit scenarios of the ‘what would so-and-so think, feel, or expect me to do’ variety.” In this way, perhaps people seek to use social media in a similar way to how sociality is internalized psychologically by humans. Although the desire for friendship is clear, people may change their understandings of social

media to accommodate how ‘friendship’, in their understanding, cannot exist online, like Jo; or like Friedrich, they may not adapt their perceptions of social media and, in turn, become deeply disappointed by it. However, regardless of these participants’ unfulfilled desires for friendship over Facebook, they continue to use social media like externalized forums for envisaging themselves through the eyes of others. Instead of viewing this as anti-social or avoidant, it may be more fruitful for anthropology, as ICTs increasingly make the virtual more apparent, to expand the meaning of sociality to include more psychological and individual processes.

#### **4.4 Commodified Sociality**

As consumer culture progressed from modernity, objects that were accumulated by people were done so for reasons which grew increasingly detached from the practical function of such objects. Baudrillard (1998, x) writes, “in the logic of signs, as in that of symbols, objects are no longer linked in any sense to a *definite* function or need.” According to Baudrillard (1998, x), consumerism creates a world wherein the many objects humans encounter in a day, both virtual and actual, respond primarily to either the “social logic” of status or “the logic of desire.” The corporations which manufacture these objects are also, to a great degree, responsible for manufacturing these logics. Seeing how secularism has risen greatly with consumerism, Mayer (1998, x) writes, “consumption as a new tribal myth, has become the morality of our present world.” Baudrillard (1998, x) claims, “just as Medieval society was balanced on God and the Devil, so ours is balanced on consumption and its denunciation.” Where ‘black magic’ was once feared, says Baudrillard (1998, x), consumption has become “the prophylactic whiteness of a saturated society, a society with no history and no dizzying heights, a society with no myth other than itself.” A society with no sense of historicity or a plateau with no depth are recurring descriptions of the consumerist world we live in with ICTs, both within and outside of academic research (for example, Carr 2010, Deleuze and Guattari 1987, Higman 2017, Turkle 2011).

Baudrillard’s (198) ‘logic of desire’ and ‘social logic’ are intended to stand as reductions of what, in his opinion, was originally a prized logic of functionality that ruled our relationships to things. However,

current research in psychology and anthropology demonstrates that there is a great deal of implicit functionality to such logics of sociality and desire, which are increasingly exploited in the design of ICTs and media. Veissière and Stendel (2018, 4) state, “with a smartphone, nearly all notifications that the user encounters elicit a social value and thus activate the dopaminergic reward circuit, leading the user to anticipate and seek these rewarding notifications.” More apparently and visibly than ever before, thoughts of social relations rule our habits, goal-setting and identities. The more that ICTs work to satisfy our sociality, the more the lines blur between the self, others and objects and the more vulnerable our intersubjectivities become to manipulation and commodification.

#### **4.4.1 Production and Objects**

It is no doubt that now, amid this, we try to reconcile and “recover the reflexes of civilization,” as Baudrillard (1998, 26) puts it, as we grapple for a sense of sociality and intersubjectivity within our post-postmodern world of things. It is difficult to find, however, a leftover aspect or, ‘surplus value’, of humanity that has not yet been commodified in some way or, at least, is not within sights for doing so. In this section, I explore how participants navigate the privatization and commodification of their relations and selves as both producers and objects in the context of social media.

To begin, Cindy tells me that, recently, she’s had to end a ‘friendship’ with a ‘friend’ on WeChat. “He always shows off his uh, his very expensive things,” she explains, “and it’s very annoying, and uh, finally I deleted him because it’s really, um, sometimes these people will change our value of, uh,” she pauses, “of our life.” So many people on Weibo, says Cindy, “show off their things and so many people follow him because, he’s rich, she’s rich, but I think these are not good things...to do that.” I ask her, “why do you say it’s not a good thing to do?” “Because,” she replies, “the networking connection is not just to show off yourself. It’s more about to share, share something with others, share your experience, your emotions,” she replies, “and uh, in case there’s something new, like, the news, the information, the events, and not just all yourself.” Cindy mostly uses her phone to browse social media, saying, “I usually log on um, my laptop to log onto PAWS to do homework. For the social connecting I always use my phone, I

don't use the computer." As for making her own posts, Cindy says, "I just scan things and, not post mine...I don't do that." Cindy accesses social media on her smartphone when she is "cross-spacing—or, when I'm on the bus," she tells me. Also, while "doing my homework, or before I sleep, I will do that because I, I want to know how my friends are going on, and uh, what's the news right now in China or in Canada. I just, want to know something, so I, would go on Facebook." Cindy is aware of those who use social media to show off their wealth and works to avoid them. Her acknowledgement of others' self-serving materialism and how it negatively affects her aids in her creating meaning for her online consumption, which in turn, nurtures the quality of its sociality.

Although sociality is explicitly important to Cindy, on a deeper level, the most important value which attracts her attention is 'interesting'. Cindy says, above all, "I like to see something funny, something interesting. Somebody—if they post uh 500 to 600 words, I won't see that. And if the picture is not interesting, just, uh, a scenery, I won't see that either," explains Cindy. "I want to see, um, some interesting and funny things. That will be satisfying." Despite her friends being important to her, in the end, updates from friends in the context of social media are just more pieces of information that compete with other, more or less interesting pieces, which are held to the same standard of 'if it's not interesting, I won't see it'.

Cindy tells me, "before the Internet, when I was 5 or 6, I usually played cards with my friends and some activities outside, not just at home in front of the computer. I usually went out with my friends. I want to say it will be very boring if I lose my connections with my friends back in China. There are many friends in my senior school and elementary school, and we will lose our connection, if we don't have [social media]. But," Cindy says, "on the other side, we will make some true friends..." she pauses, "like um...sometimes a post makes them friends with you." She tells me that on WeChat, someone will see her post "and decide which kind of person I am. They will choose whether they will be close to you or not close to you. If they see I'm posting [something] not interesting to them, they will leave distance from me. Yeah," she concludes, "if you are interesting to them, they will be closer to you." For Cindy, the

relationships she maintains with her old classmates are more symbolic than practical; yet, looking past these more symbolic connections, Cindy sees the opportunity to make “true friends” beneath the commodifying metrics of social media.

As an example, she explains, “if I post a very expensive bag, like a Burberry or something, people who like expensive bags will be my very close friend. They will look at my post, but they don’t know very much. Or,” alternately, she suggests, “maybe we *could* become friends, but, she saw my post, she won’t be friends with me.” Perhaps this approach aids in circumventing the vulnerable awareness that people will judge her ‘friend-worthiness’ on the nature of her content. On the other hand, however, Cindy describes similar motivators of her own which govern her choices of people she is interested in connecting with: “If he is a boring person, he will post boring things.” She tells me this moments after disparaging the superficial aspects of friend-making online. Therefore, the lowest common denominator of sociality online is entertainment: it’s hard to make “true friends” online when one primarily exists to others as a “surface level” source of atomizing, disembodied entertainment.

Cindy navigates this by ensuring that her social media connections can take her offline and into a less commodified, shared world of things. Interacting with positive people and ‘positive energy’ is a large part of this for Cindy. “It feels like it gets along with my life more easily,” she says of positivity, “someone with lots of negative energy, I won’t follow.” One of the tacit indicators which helps Cindy to determine the positivity of a ‘friend’ is their open- versus closed-mindedness. “Open-minded people don’t hide in their profile pictures, they post their experiences close to their life. Closed-minded people post comments, [like] comments on the news. They won’t post their own experiences. When people post the positive energy experiences, they get more and more likes.”

“Is it important, do you think, for a lot of people—is it important for you? To get a lot of likes?” I ask.

“Um, personally, I don’t care how many likes I get, but I don’t like to post something I don’t like, uh, to meet others’ requirement that I post things which they like. I won’t do that. I just post things I like.”

“Mhm,” I respond, “it’s like, fake.”



“Fake, yah,” Cindy says.

“Just to get more people interested...” I add.

“Attracting attention, yah,” she says, “rich people post attention-attracting pictures. Admirers like it, to hopefully attract their friendship and approval.” For Cindy, the relatively small amount of posting she does do is a way for her to “release my emotion,” she says – “a way of release of my emotion in my experience.” Cindy places a high value on the meaningfulness of the things she views on social media in addition to what she posts. She tells me, “something meaningful tells you how to grow up and teaches you how to deal with your life...and something expressing life, like how to fold your clothes. That is what I like. Maybe it’s not important right now,” she says, “but with our life in general, they must be very important, because if we are without Internet our life would be very simple and boring. But with the Internet we have many views, that are very interesting events.” Ultimately, Cindy’s line of thinking presents the qualifiers for beneficial sociality online and well-being that are shared by multiple participants. Battling the superficiality of sociality online necessarily involves those aspects – either action or the stirring of certain attitudes – which are feeling-oriented in a productive way, subjective and manage to escape or lead the user away from commodification.

#### **4.4.2 The Looking Glass Self**

For participants who focus more actively on presenting themselves online, how they estimate the ways in which their artifacts are being consumed by others and how this reflexivity impacts their own subjectivities are of upmost importance. This type of attending to one’s online appearance can move in two ways, as illustrated in the following cases of Laura and Tanner. In this section, I present Laura. Laura seeks to present herself outwardly on social media in a way that is, for her, respectable and one in which she can be confident. Her management of her online appearance not only makes her feel more positively about herself but, in doing so, it strengthens her certainty that others will share that confidence in her. In full circle, the effort she puts into herself truly does influence others to think more highly of her. This is what Charles Horton Cooley (1922, 183-184) calls the looking-glass self:

In a very large and interesting class of cases the social referent takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one's self—that is any idea he appropriates—appears in a particular mind, and the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind. A social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking-glass self.

Cooley (1922, 184) then quotes the American transcendentalist poet Ralf Waldo Emerson: “Each to each a looking-glass / Reflects the other that doth pass.” Laura has many individuals from different groups as ‘friends’ on Facebook and, occasionally, the looking-glass nature of her social self struggles to simultaneously reflect everyone's expectations of her while displaying her genuine ‘whole’ self.

Laura tells me that having people from a variety of circles on Facebook – “like, I have my boyfriend's grandpa on Facebook, I have my parents, I have cousins and friends” – “lends to an awareness [that] you're monitoring perceptions of yourself.” Laura acknowledges that her presentation-of-self online is at once entertainment for others – something which others may consume mindlessly – while at the same time, she is adamant that there are real and lasting consequences of any mismanagement of such consumption by others. Laura says her Facebook ‘friends’ are comprised of “people who I wanna, um, I guess, keep their respect, or uh, their good image of me.” Furthermore, she adds, “it's pretty rare that you ever show anyone your full self – or, definitely everyone sees different sides of you. I think on something like Facebook, some people don't care. It's like, you know, ‘this is me and I don't care who sees it’. But for me,” she pauses briefly to think, “I've always been a person who, uh, I don't know, I was always like, a goody-goody, and I cared a lot about that, and wanted to maintain—and still do, like to maintain that.” In this way, it can be said that Laura makes the most of the commodifying nature of Facebook. She ‘packages’ herself in a way that appeals to those whose opinions matter to her. That she is segmented and consumed, on a deeper level, generates a return for her in the form of positivity from others.

The importance of maintaining respect from others is central for Laura, but the fragmenting nature of social media makes that complicated. I ask Laura, “do you think there's more of a whole of yourself being shown? Or, on the other end of the spectrum, could it be an even more fragmented version of yourself?” Laura responds, saying, “I would say maybe it's a more fragmented *perception*.” She continues, “because

it's not, like I said, all the bad parts of me" – as in, she tries not to allow any "bad parts" of herself to shine though. And that, she says, is "simply because I'm aware of it. It's exactly what I want to portray to the world. I mean, occasionally, other people will post stuff or comment stuff or whatever. I can't control that. But, on the whole, I'm directing everything that's happening on there." She adds, "not that I'm faking it – it's not like secretly I'm a horrible person." For example, Laura says, "I'm not someone who's gonna' pose for pictures while drunk, 'cause 99% of the time people post them and I don't want that." Ultimately, Laura says, Facebook "opens me up to more," and that she's become "more aware of what people think." By controlling what others consume of her self-presentation, Laura can more successfully ensure that the image that others have of her is one that she respects. Therefore, Laura tends to her online relations in a way that is like self-care. Her self-respect via Facebook is socially enabled and, in a way, dependent upon her online commodification. Overall, it is beneficial to her sense of well-being because it gives her peace of mind and confidence knowing that she is presenting her best self to the world.

#### **4.4.3 Consume to Become – 'You Are What You Eat'**

Veissière and Stendel (2018) emphasize that there are healthy ways to engage with social media, likening the consumption of information to the consumption of food. They write, "smartphones may be equated to hyper-efficient kitchenware. Both technologies help optimize the processing and delivery of specific kinds of basic needs: food on the one hand, and social information on the other. The key to eating well and being good social beings lies in finding the quality and intensity of *consumption rituals*" (Veissiere and Stendel 2018, 7). In this section, I present Tanner, whose concerns for self-presentation are similar to Laura's. However, Tanner exemplifies another facet of consideration which users make to their self-presentation based on their consumption and how they are consumed. I liken this second mode to the phrase 'you are what you eat.'

Tanner is a 19-year-old college student living in Calgary. He currently studies criminology and is working toward gaining credits for police college. His desire to become a police officer makes him "protect" what he posts, in his words. He explains that not only would the police force be able to find out

what he posts, but who he has as ‘friends’ on Facebook would be a potential factor his future employers would check out as well. Tanner explains, “like, I had a bunch of friends on—I had huge—a lot—of friends. That’s all I cared about when I was younger – is getting friends on Facebook. And then um, then, I figured out that I want to be a police officer. And then I had people on my Facebook that were like, anti-police – the kids you could tell that were already going in the wrong direction and they’re, like, getting in trouble with the law *already*, so, I mean, I had to delete those guys,” he says, it seems, with some effort, pausing to inhale, “and girls and, then I changed, my Facebook se—privacy settings so like, I can be only viewed by friends.” He was instructed at a police camp about the force’s attitudes toward proper personal social media management. Tanner says, “they were like, ‘if you’re on social media, make sure you’re safe on there, and make sure you’re only accepting people who you know and not people that you don’t. And make sure that things people can see are only—or, what you’re posting your friends can only see’. So...” I tell Tanner that my father worked with the Toronto Police. Throughout our interview I found I could indirectly relate with his potential struggles to manage a personal and social life, especially online, while preparing himself for a role of authority and obedience and, frankly, one that is not always respected.

Tanner’s career goals and his social media activities intercept a lot. Wanting to become a police officer has made him “more mindful” about posting and sharing. He wants to appear to be a good influence on others in a way that would be respected by the police force. He says, “it’s like, if a future employer, really look—when they look at this what will they think? What kind of idea will they have of me?” He adds, “so, it’s definitely been conflicting.” Tanner says he’s become “smarter about it. I actually have four police officers that I have friends on Facebook with now,” he tells me, “so, that’s even more um, conflicting becau—well, I don’t think it’s actually conflicting, it’s more of a benefit of—for myself, because now I’m actually well-regulating my posts and making sure everything’s okay and will be approved when I go for these interviews and when they do background checks, kind of thing.” He thinks about the police mentors he has online to gauge the appropriateness of his online presence. “If I were in their position,” says Tanner, “what would I think about it? And would I approve? I keep that in the back of

my mind. It's definitely keeping me from posting those negative things. And then those negative things staying off my Facebook are going to help me in the end when I apply into the police force." In this sense, he is similar to Laura in wanting to maintain respectability and thinking about it reflexively.

However, Tanner puts more emphasis than Laura on who he is following and whether he can follow their lead to present himself in a way that is in line with what the police force would look upon favourably. For Tanner, it is less about expressing himself in a respectful way and more about constructing a self. He uses the consumption of his presentation by the four police officers he has as friends as a way to position himself, telling me, "they now have full access to my account, to view what I post, my pictures, my status', anything like that, so, [I keep] that in the back of my mind." Tanner also is sure to consume information which he deems necessary or useful to building his career-ready self, especially since he knows that this can be witnessed by his contacts in the police force. He tells me, "I'm always keeping up with the news. I get the links uh from friends who share. I also follow Global, CTV, Calgary Police, stuff like that." By aligning himself with what he sees as the norm amongst his Facebook 'friends' in the police force, Tanner is able to learn from the information he consumes, which will, hopefully, further gain him favour with his future employers and avoid the type of connections and labels which would not do so.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

By fostering constructive and disciplined social media habits of self-presentation, both Laura and Tanner work towards self-originated goals: for the former, being balanced and respectably expressive and, for latter, positioning himself to be viewed favourably by a group into which he wishes to gain entrance. Ultimately, Laura and Tanner's cases demonstrate the possibility of conduct on social media that works toward feelings of accomplishment and contributes to overall aspects of well-being. Alternately, Friedrich's case highlights the perils of approaching social media 'whole-heartedly', or perhaps with too much sincerity and expectation for prolonged meaningful connecting between friends. This comes to affect his well-being because Facebook is what Friedrich relies on for his sense of sociality amongst him

and his friends who remain abroad. Furthermore, Cindy understands there is a level of superficiality even amongst her and her old classmates on Facebook. She, however, avoids this potential detriment to her well-being by weighing the merit of online relationships in terms of their fruitfulness for her functioning in and enjoyment of daily life. Doing so influences what Cindy comes to expect from others online regardless of her relation to them away from the keys. If they bring her positivity, those individuals – in the context of social media – will be valued subjectively higher than those who do not, even if those who do not are old friends.

The importance of establishing beneficial habits for how we build relationships and use language cannot be understated. Interestingly, Veissière and Stendel (2018, 3) argue, even the private phenomenon of ‘daydreaming’ serves “as a platform for offline social cognition. Supporting this view, research shows that all but a fraction of daydreaming involves social scenarios (Mar *et al.*, 2012; Song and Wang, 2012).” Furthermore, they write, “nearly half of waking time is spent in mind-wandering episodes unrelated to the task at hand (Killingsworth and Gilbert, 2010)” (Veissière and Stendel 2018, 3). For nearly half of waking time we operate within a virtual world of meaning, hashing out social scenarios, also both real and virtual. Given the all-encompassing nature of sociality, it is important to think in terms of creating positive, intentional habits in all facets of life, rather than focusing on trying to break only certain negative habits, for example, aiming to “quit Facebook.” Instead, one could focus on the positive of becoming more sincere, for example, or more focused, and do this habitually, in all aspects of life, which may qualitatively improve one’s sociality on and off Facebook to the point that quitting Facebook altogether may no longer seem necessary.

## CHAPTER 5 TIME AND SUBJECTIVITY

In the previous chapters, I discussed how the individual embodies certain characteristics of communicating and presenting themselves over social media. I also explored how these subjectivities impact perceptions of self, sociality and well-being and how the metrics of social media can both exacerbate and positively enhance those qualities. I concluded on the topic of internalizing and projecting the commodification of sociality online. In this chapter, I explore these same dynamics but on a larger scale, from a perspective that is rooted in our human perception of time. In other words, while Chapter Three demonstrates the production and consumption dynamics of the social body with social media, this chapter demonstrates the management of object time and temporalities through the body politic of surveillance capitalism.

The commodification of sociality is a very influential factor on social media and is part of the larger pattern of consumerism to commodify human subjectivities. In this section, I draw on Martineau's (2015) work on how, since the widespread use of the clock during the Industrial Revolution, the human experience of time has been colonized by the global market. The way that humans interact with ICTs today gives evidence of the continuance of this trajectory of the transformation of social time, leisure and entertainment. The participants in this study, especially those who participated in creating audio diaries, demonstrate how the rapid onslaught of information one encounters over social media affects attitudes toward the passage of time and thus structures perceptions of social time, sociality and well-being.

### 5.1 Information

In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. *Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention* and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.

- Herbert Simon (1971, 40-41; italics added)

Within internet culture, there is a systematic willing or coercing of individuals to participate in creating capital. Merely by interacting with a site, users generate the commodity of data – digital evidence of their actions – which then are bought and sold en masse. Such encroachment of economic activity has worked itself into the nearly-disappeared, post-postmodern private or ‘leisure’ domain in the form of the attention economy. The massive amounts of information that *could be* consumed, drives our attention away from longer-term ‘moments’ and has progressively broken up our social experience of time into smaller and smaller subjective units, or moments. On one hand, perceiving reality in terms of these smaller moments is considered by participants to enable a more efficient use of time. They reason, ‘I have nothing to do right now, but filling this empty time slot is within my abilities. Therefore, I will,’ and they are rewarded by the dopaminergic response to completing tasks (Veissière and Stendel 2018). On the other hand, however, these same participants are aware they ought not to believe in the former line of reasoning, that they ought to be applying themselves and thinking in longer-terms – that merely filling moments is beside the point and that the *quality* of their actions is what matters. However, incessant social media use is so normalized that this latter line of reasoning rarely wins and, further, rarely promises the same kind of immediate rewards.

As consumers, we are given much incentive – socially, biologically, even financially – to ‘streamline’ our time ‘in this fast-paced world’; however, what we as humans need most is not efficiency but care. Though these are not mutually exclusive, the subjectivities involved in well-being are perpetually usurped by the logic of efficiency, aimed at consumers yet ultimately serving the global market. This and the constant barrage of information changes how we perceive ‘free time’ and urges us to ‘kill time’. A behavioural feedback loop is triggered which further atomizes how we ‘spend time’ and how we consume information.

As individuals become more dependent on the habits that ICTs promote, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to break out of the pace of life and attention that is demanded by their relationships to objects and information. Baudrillard (1998, x) writes, “consumption is an active form of relationship (not



only to objects, but also to society and to the world), a mode of systematic activity and global response which founds our entire cultural system.” Baudrillard (1998, 26) sees objects of technology, which includes information, as “technical slaves” and “obedient objects.” Indeed, today we use ICTs to outsource, in one sense, the computation of mental tasks, such as memory. The flip side is, however, that we come to live “by object time,” Baudrillard (1998, 26) writes, “by this I mean that we live at the pace of objects, live to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession.” Our perceptions are shaped not only by the technologies themselves, but also by the pace at which they bring us information.

Computer scientist Jaron Lanier (2018) states that, contrary to what many people think today, “information is not intrinsically weightless, free and in infinite supply, but only exists to the degree that people can perceive and process it. It’s only given meaning when it grounds out in human experience. Information is alienated experience.” The consumption patterns of participants in this study suggest that many SNS users experience ‘information over-load’, whether they perceive it as such. ‘FOMO’ – or, fear of missing out – is a rampant sensation and expression within internet culture that indicates, amongst other things, how there seems not to be enough time in relation to the information which demands to be imbued with meaning. Users are not only susceptible to the ‘will’ of ICTs – technologies’ demand to be used – but also to the demands of information – its demand that it be given meaning. In the end, there is not enough time to grant meaning to so much information, and yet, it is the desire to do so which severely impacts well-being in consumerism.

#### **5.1.1 Audio Diary: Natalie**

Natalie is an 18-year-old undergraduate student at the University of Saskatchewan. To begin her audio diary, Natalie comments on her “skimming through” of everything on Facebook, then suddenly she says, “there’s an ad again! I don’t know why,” immediately followed by, “but I sort of know why Facebook does it, because it keeps it free for us and if we have to pay I’m pretty sure a whole lot less people would have Facebook. As much as we love it...”

Sermijn *et al.* (2008, 638) write, “each time we speak, at the same time a new self is born, embodied in the story constructions—able to be spoken and read in multiple ways (Davies *et al.*, 2004).” Natalie and the other participants frequently present contradictions throughout their audio diaries and the work of Sermijn *et al.* (2008) has been helpful in approaching them analytically. Sermijn *et al.* (1998, 641) write, “the speaking ‘I’ is multivoiced and always shifting.” Throughout the audio diaries, I give attention to these contradictions not to point out a flaw in a participant’s reasoning, but to highlight how the medium they are engaging with has perhaps challenged them to reconsider a habitual response.

Natalie sees a quiz and doesn’t think highly of it. “I’ve never done it, and I never will,” she says. Suddenly, at 150 seconds into her audio diary, something peaks her interest: “it’s actually kinda interesting,” she explains, “so it says: the fact that millions of school children require medication on a daily basis so they can more easily assimilate into the culture of public schooling does not mean these children are damaged. It means something’s very wrong with the idea of schooling.” She is reading what is like an image-poster on her Facebook ‘feed’. The political topic of ADHD in this poster strikes a personal chord with her. She stays on this topic for 92 seconds – much longer than usual.

A couple of minutes later, she encounters another engaging piece: “Oh. So now I see this thing called ‘Family Goals’. It shows families at the beach and having fun and all dressing up together, but it’s like, sometimes that’s just unrealistic...” She says, “I know I’m just being over-critical about this but some people just don’t think and you have to be like—watch how people could take it—” and in the same breath she says, “um...let’s see,” indicating the completion of her internalization of this issue and that it’s time to move onto something else. In two seconds, Natalie finds a new topic.

Another issue which peaks her interest is that of an upcoming election. She uses phrases like “kinda happy,” “I think it’s really, really good,” and “people are actually starting to care.” She ends her description of the event blandly, however, with, “it’s something I kind of like,” and five seconds later, changes tack: “Oh, so, like, a quiz: ‘Which Bond Girl Are You?’ I actually did this quiz,” she admits, “and

I got M. Which I kind of like...” Two minutes later, Natalie’s audio recorder is accidentally shut off, she later explains in an email.

When she starts her next audio diary file, she is using Instagram and recording successfully. Natalie immediately acknowledges, “I just got a recent follower,” slightly upbeat about that, then, deflating to, “I have no idea who they are but I’m just gonna kind of leave it ‘cause I don’t feel like checking it right now.” She realizes, “it’s actually kind of interesting how I’ve kind of almost become lazy just kind of skimming through this. There’s this one post—” Snapping her out of this introspection somewhere mid-realization comes another post: “It’s kinda cool,” she says. “Sometimes I will sit through and read it all but other times it’s like, no, just skim through it.” She tries to read through the post for the sake of her audio diary, however, this brings back her urge to merely skim it, which in turn reminds her again: “it’s kind of bad, how lazy I’ve become, just because I’m not—don’t feel like reading at all. I don’t know how to describe it, but it’s more like I don’t have the time.” At the same time, however, she understands: “But I’m sitting here on a phone, like I’m quite, it’s almost lazy, kind of, if you’re just sitting here with a phone in your hand and you don’t feel like reading a, a 50 word explanation of something.” While realizing this aloud, Natalie’s eyes skim over a health-oriented post, preparing her; she says, “hm, what’s next?”

Unfazed by her previous understanding, she seamlessly moves on to describe an image of what smoking does to one’s lungs, adding, “if you are smoking and you’re seeing this, I would like, put my cigarette out right away. I could not even fathom the idea that someone would want to still smoke after reading that. Um, so that’s, actually kinda cute...” Convinced on the matter of smoking, within the same second, Natalie flows into a description of the next post. She is looking at a picture of a Danish Instagrammer and an American blogger in Holland, “and they’re just kind of having lunch together, and it looks really cool.” At this point, a trend becomes apparent in Natalie’s descriptions: she revels in the posts’ ability to provide her with something she wouldn’t typically encounter. Her “laziness” is justified while the posts are imbued with novelty, ‘coolness’ and ‘interestingness’. It’s not laziness, however, but a

standardized, social, hyper-activity and a coerced desire to create meaning that impels her, while the intersubjectivities involved fuel today's surveillance capitalism.

### **5.1.2 'Cool' and 'Interesting'**

Natalie follows NASA on Instagram, which provides "a lot of pictures of Earth from far away, which is really cool." She follows the "Surgical Museum of Chicago – that's actually called the International Museum of Surgical Science. It's somewhere I'd love to go," she says. Both posts from this page and NASA provide her with images of things she's "probably not going to see in real life ever but still really cool to see," she says. "It's actually really cool, it's like one of the things if I don't get to go to it – hey – I know something about it." First, the *expectation* of this type of 'eye-opening' information, in Natalie's case, carries the promise of a certain gratification, which she learns to anticipate. Secondly, the relative 'coolness' or 'interestingness' of posts is unpredictable and varies. This combination of expectation and unpredictability are two important factors responsible for holding social media users in a state of unsatisfactory anticipation, something that Veissiere and Stendel (2018, 4) claim to be closely linked to depression and anxiety due to its unpleasant and highly addictive nature.

### **5.1.3 Object Time and Narrative**

Amongst participants in this study, 'being interested' in content is a highly valued and complex state of 'being entertained'. Businesses operating in surveillance capitalism rely on users' entertainment-oriented approach and their "passive following on Facebook," to use Krasnova *et al.*'s (2013:1) phrase. Unlike viewing a commercial on television, there is now a much more advanced and mutual loop of information exchanged between the producers and the consumers of media.

With this in mind, I left instructions open-ended for participants conducting audio diaries. My intent was to minimize my impact as a researcher to better 'capture' such feedback patterns. I told participants to narrate and simply give attention to their experiences, feelings and thoughts as they happened while browsing social media. I found that despite the deliberately open instructions, the participants' narratives manifested an almost identical pattern. The pace and extent of the information presented on SNSs

encourages the participants to rapidly cycle through topics on which they provide fragmented commentary. Across all three audio diaries, there is a mean time of only 42 seconds of ‘narrative’ given to one topic at a time. Natalie changes topics about 70 times in just under one hour of recording, Tanner changes topics 59 times during his 45 minutes of audio diary, and Sam, 96 times in roughly one hour. The most common amount of time given per topic (average of all modes) is 33.5 seconds.

Since a ‘topic’ is occasionally a subjective distinction, the number of topics covered per audio diary can vary depending on the interpretation; however, for the vast majority, these topics have distinct edges and are marked by a change in the social media post or image of content that the participant is reading. Occasionally, all three participants break their commentary with a reflection on the nature of their actions and they question the point of such browsing. It seems that the presence of so much information also positively affects their desire and motivation to continue browsing despite their consistent reflections upon its futility. For example, Natalie frequently comments on the pointlessness of scrolling through Facebook, then, suddenly, a new piece of information would vaguely excite her and reinstate her original browsing pattern. It is also possible, however, that having to do the audio diary itself compels her to continue browsing. Still, the commitment to complete an audio diary does not necessarily involve this distinct type of narrative – of reading each piece of information. It is this fixated attention on the information, as opposed to the participants’ own autonomous narrative of feelings or interpretations, that supports Lanier’s (2018) argument that information itself demands attention through its requirement that it be given meaning. Natalie, Tanner and Sam’s brief realizations demonstrate a respite from a deep semiotic immersion in a non-autonomous narrative. They are overpowered by ‘smart’ media, whose meanings permeate the husks of once-descriptive metaphors, while the participants’ intermittent realizations depict a more self-aware, questioning, autonomous ‘I’.

Without humans, information is empty – a tree falling in the woods with no one around to hear it; though, it is not for information’s sake that we endeavor to give it meaning but our own. As self-conscious beings, our certainty of our very existence depends on the dialectic we perform with reality via language

(Lanier 2018). By giving meaning to information, we create a niche that becomes ‘mine’ and, in turn, articulate a ‘blind spot’ that becomes ‘I’. Endless information is so alluring because it provides an endless articulation and affirmation of self, but only on an existential level. Problems arise when passively scrolling on social media because it becomes a stand-in for long-term, practical, gratification which can instead be derived from an autonomous exercise of will – reading a book, for example (Wolf 2018). Our existential need for information means that ‘fast’ information available online is very tempting, like fast-food; but without the drive of autonomous decision-making, habitual users are suspended in a comparably timeless void, which is largely responsible for hampering the participants’ narratives from developing in any other way. Inhabiting this kind of object time results in a fragmented sociality: participants feel guilt for perceived poor long-term time management; yet, they work – because the interface rewards them – at sustaining subjectivities which, although are occasionally ‘deep’ or heartfelt, are fleeting and under-nurtured. Ultimately, the object time of social media is a result of interface metrics that exploit the human drive to create meaning and sustain environments wherein human intersubjectivities are mined and extracted.

## **5.2 The Capitalist Construction of Time**

We live in an era that is measured by abstract time. Martineau (2015, 1) explains, “a long way from rudimentary time-marking achieved by planting sticks in the ground, observing lights or measuring shadows, today’s high-tech atomic clocks, which measure the second (officially 9,192,631,770 oscillations of a caesium atom) with an accuracy of better than one part in a hundred trillion, underpin a globalized time-system that structures our lives and activities to an unprecedented degree.” Although time-keeping devices were used in Chinese, Islamic and Greco-Roman civilizations, it wasn’t until “Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe that mechanical clocks first acquire a social function, albeit a very limited one initially [...] Clocks introduced in Europe a form of time-reckoning based on the empty, homogenous and constant abstract time-units of clock-time” (Martineau 2015, 54). For example, in the early 1300s, ‘work bells’ were installed in French towns to serve textile and agrarian industry (Martineau

2015). Amid the myriad other bells which rang out to signify “episodic points and manifestations of events or danger,” work bells established “a frame of time-reference that is dictated not so much by discrete events, but by the constant unfolding of the time of labour between two signals” (Martineau 2015, 58). For the first time, life was experienced from beneath a metaphysical grid that demarcated the passage of standardized units of time. That which occurred between them was deemed labour. Time became an independent variable that was abstracted – not related to social life.

### **5.2.1 Colonizing Temporal Subjectivities**

World standard time was established in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Railway companies harmonized local time into a national standard which served the circulation of goods and bolstered a social time regime (Martineau 2015). In 1967, official time-tracking was moved from the cosmological level, which measures time by the rotation of celestial bodies, to the subatomic level, which uses the movement of a caesium atom to consistently measure one second. The former method became too imprecise for the highly specific time-keeping demands of global trade (Martineau 2015). Although clock-time was first established in pre-capitalist, medieval Europe, Martineau (2015, 50) argues, “it is only with the consolidation of industrial capitalism that abstract clock-time comes to occupy a hegemonic position in social time relations.” Newton’s theory of ‘absolute time’ further exemplified and popularized the importance of pure, objective clock-time, and, amongst those in bourgeoisie society, shamed “those ‘common’ or ‘vulgar’ measures associated with relative times” and deemed them inadequate (Martineau 2015, 99). Thus, the popularization of clock-time and the emergence of capitalism progressed independently until time became commodified within the capitalist value system.

According to Adam (2004, 136-137), “time has been a most effective colonizing tool.” As clock-time became more globally utilized, “capitalist practices of value formation and appropriation” worked to “alienate and subsume the concrete temporalities of material and human (re)productive practices” (Martineau 2015, 108). Today with ICTs, the impulses of efficiency and productivity remain in the consumer – the desire to “produce *more* in a fixed abstract unit of time” – but now, these impulses are

used as selling points to market these technologies to us, further perpetuating the hyper-capitalist awareness of the passage of standardized time (Martineau 2015, 108). In the same way that the commons were privatized during the Industrial Revolution, temporal subjectivities were and continue to be colonized. According to Martineau (2015), “the tragedy of temporal alienation” is the subversion of human time to the needs of a global market.

While consumerism puts object time on a pedestal, true social time, or leisure, is denied. As opposed to meandering through an integrated information environment curated physically, browsing of social media leaves users craving more from endless, manufactured information environments. Eventually, by standardizing subjectivities to object time, only the basest of existential obligations are met: witnessing information and ascribing meaning, leaving little to brace users from feeling that a vast expanse of meaninglessness waits just for them, extending far beyond their awareness, demanding it be acknowledged before evaporating into obscurity again. Nihilism, anomie and depression are, not surprisingly, continuous by-products of this pattern in consumerism.

### **5.2.2 Audio Diary: Tanner**

Tanner, the 19-year-old aspiring police officer, starts off his audio diary with: “Right, see what’s new on the Facebook,” with a *laissez-faire* sigh. “So I just watched a Mr. Keegan Jimmay video. I really enjoy his content, it’s pretty funny. He makes videos of him and his girlfriend—well, he impersonates his girlfriend. It’s pretty funny.” This topic lasts 20 seconds. “Just scrolling down,” he says.

He comments on an ad for t-shirts, then, “there’s lots of videos, um, lots of the stuff from—uh, wow! A lot of stuff on ISIS...and there’s just a kid in the video, who just ran into a room with a knife—huge knife. He’s cutting his teddy-bear’s head off. Uh. Okay then. Wow. Um, ISIS. Alright.” The tone of his voice makes each segment distinct. It rises, inflected, excited at the start, then lowers, finally finishing.

Next, he talks about a terrorist attack for 25 seconds: “Oh, the mastermind behind the Paris attacks was killed. Um, it’s all great and stuff but I mean, if they’re saying that they have sleeper cells in all Western countries, it’s kinda scary. Um...” He says, “still on Facebook. Cyanide and Happiness—oh,



they're so funny! They're skits—er, comic strips..." He reads one under his breath, laughs shallowly, and then, "uh...Oh! A hepatitis scare in Lake Louis resort. That's kind of scary, people who ate or drank." He explains he follows a lot of news outlets on Facebook – "I'm very pro-news, I wanna know what's going on in the world" – and some comic strips and funny memes – he reads, "Me if I was a drink, and then it says...bitch vodka. That's kind of funny." In all, his "information diet," as Lanier (2018) puts it, consists of that which evokes two primary emotional extremes: comedy and fear.

At around six minutes into the recording he exclaims, "Wow. More than half the Canadians disapprove the government's plan to bring in 25,000 refugees by the end of next month. Wow. And Canadians would rather US bomb ISIS than take on any—oh, that's interesting." He clicks the link, emits a weary sigh and says, "Like I said earlier, I love keeping up with the news and just...with, policing," he explains, "your favourite subjects in school should have been English and Social Studies 'cause you need the social skills and you need to be aware of what's going on. And with Canada being such a diverse country, there's lots of culture and everything, so you need to be socially aware."

He takes a minute to look up the instructions I sent him over Skype, which slips him into informant-mode. He informs me that a lot of his time is spent on Facebook. "I follow, like, potential jobs...so just seeing everything that they're doing is uh, just making me want to do the job even more." He tells me his work "also has a Facebook page and uh, when there's shifts open or stuff that needs to be put out it's always out on the Facebook page." At around eight minutes into the recording, he says, "Alright, well I'm caught up on Facebook. There's a couple new stories, I'll scroll back up. Oh, Jared—Wow! The uh, Subway guy—this is, this is great news," he says excitedly, now re-entrenched.

He begins to read about the trial of Jared Fogle, sentenced to 15 years in prison for possession of child pornography and having sex with underage prostitutes. "Good. Good. I hate those guys," he says passionately, "I wanna go into the um, integrated child exploitation unit which deals with all that stuff when I become a police officer, so he can really go, like, rot in jail." He assumes the attitude of those police officers like whom he aspires to be. So far, for Tanner, this has been an experience of steeping in

information which elicits the extremes of his emotions while affirming attitudes he either already has or that he aspires to have.

At almost ten minutes in, he brings up his friends. “I constantly tag one of my best friends” on comedy video posts, “‘cause she introduced me to them and they’re absolutely hilarious, uh, we banter back and forth and it’s really funny. And she just ‘liked’ the tag that I put on her.” He switches from Facebook to Instagram. “All of it’s just kind of crap,” he says, “just things to keep my mind occupied. Um, there’s a bunch of YouTube stars that I follow on Instagram,” he says, as if trying to qualify its utility. “Um, I have some friends travelling the world right now so it’s pretty cool seeing their pictures. One just got back from Australia...” He pauses for a few seconds, then starts again with a new energy: “Like, all I do on Instagram is look at the picture and scroll past it. If I like it then I’ll click ‘like’, but really I don’t do too, too much on Instagram,” he says, adding, “I rarely post.”

He then goes onto an app called Vine. He explains, “it’s just six second videos and there’s categories that you can look under like comedy. I would look into that one. My big thing is comedy, like, I absolutely love the comedy stuff. This is where I probably get the most relief—”

“People are SnapChatting me,” he interrupts himself. “I’m gonna go check that out. There’s one of my friends and we just insult each other basically,” he says, laughing, “it’s pretty funny. She lives all the way out in New Brunswick, so I don’t get to see her too, too much anymore but, she’s just a shit disturber, that’s all.” A couple seconds pass; nothing seems to come from him checking SnapChat.

Tanner says, “What else do I have for social media? Oh, Tumblr, I haven’t gone on Tumblr lately.” He yawns, audibly. “One of my best friends is actually, like, hugely popular on Tumblr. She has like, 20,000 followers or something, it’s like, she’s crazy. And that’s all she does. Which is pretty cool,” he says, adding, “I don’t understand Tumblr. What I do is, I just go on it, look at memes. Hm, SnapChat, uh...” He laughs, presumably at a message he’s received. Then, “Back to Facebook,” he says. While doing this he describes, “I just sent a Snap back and forth with uh, my friend who lives in New Brunswick, and then Tumblr didn’t have anything interesting so, I just go back to Facebook. And it’s like, continuous

circles of doing all that.” At almost 20 minutes into the recording and nothing left to see on Facebook, he says, “I’m just gonna take a pause here, um, continue in a little bit.”

He starts the recording again five hours later. “I had class to go to,” he explains, “so, got some time to uh, see what’s new on social media. So, first thing I usually do is hop onto Facebook right away.” He mumbles under his breath about a football team for 20 seconds and then reads, “Calgary’s ready for a thousand plus refugees – Interesting, I’m just worried about the jobs and where they’re going to be coming from.”

After a one second pause, he says, “So I’m just scrolling now. What can we do to lessen the grip of fear of terrorism?” Again, reading, “Turn off the television.” He agrees, “Yep, media plays such a big role in influencing our minds and the way we think and, I think social media is a huge part of that. I mean, you look at one person’s response to something and,” he yawns, “excuse me again, um, look at one person’s response to something...” he sighs, “and people go crazy. I guess social media’s just another way to express our own opinions, but sometimes it goes too far...Um,” he yawns, and then suddenly jumps: “Oh my god! Islamic extremist armed with guns and throwing grenades, stormed into the Radisson, killing all these people and initially taking hostages! One Canadian man among them. Jeez. Sure keeping up their promises and it’s kinda scary...Um, interesting, well, nothings really—excuse me,” he says, after yawning again.

During these final moments of the audio diary, Tanner seems to be increasingly tired and drops most of the previous effort he’s put into providing commentary. The fragments of information he encounters now evoke huge oscillations in emotional response. Changes in the tone of his voice articulate when he’s moved onto a new topic and the differences in how he relates and empathizes with these posts, albeit briefly.

“My friend’s travelling to Honalulu—Oh,” his indifferent tone is interrupted, “another murdered! Another homicide – the thirtieth one for Calgary. Great. Another, jeez...Lot’s of fundraisers going on,” he has changed tack, “that’s good. It’s good to see. Hm,” he pauses for one second. “Oh my god! Hit and run

driver mowed over two children at Calgary crosswalk. Ah! ‘Course they ran! Jesus. That’s disgusting to see that happening,” he says with palpable distain. “Oh,” he clears his throat, taking on a new post, “drug and weapon possessions, uh, re-share that.” Then, “More about that hit and run. Oh, that was only 36 minutes ago! Jeez—Oh wow, somebody bought \$2180 worth of Star Wars tickets because he wanted to be the only one in the theater. That’s crazy. Supreme Court of Canada just ruled that Alberta’s not constitutionally obligated to enact and publish its laws in both French and English. I mean, we don’t have a lot of French-speaking people here in Alberta, but it’s Canada’s second language, so it’s, it’s good and bad I guess. They came out with this device that could help prevent sexual assault. Interesting. That’d be good if it works. Alright, let’s check out Instagram. See what’s new…”

### **5.2.3 Implications of Object Time**

According to Arthur Kleinman (1995, 98), a “central concern in ethnography should be the interpretation of what is at stake for particular participants in particular situations.” What I see as being at stake for individuals like Tanner and Natalie are the long-term unfoldings of sociality and subjectivity that align with his own conceptions of well-being. Tanner tells me that, for him, “a day full of well-being would be laughing and joking around with your friends, being able to do what you’d like, or do what you need, and to feel good about the job you’ve done.” Yet, as the object time of social media and the addictive attention economy fragments and undermines the few personal social interactions Tanner attains through social media, it also fragments and colonizes other spheres of action within Tanner’s day. While his online sociality is comprised more of pieces of information, news and more distant social actors than personally close friends, his day-to-day may become increasingly dominated by the time he is willing to dedicate to checking social media to seek more personal intersubjective experiences. Therefore, user subjectivities away from the keys and their attainment of sociality through social media are mutually diminished by constant compulsive social media use.

In its depiction of instant-gratification and temporal alienation, Tanner’s audio diary also demonstrates that true leisure time is at stake for Millennials and the next generation of youth approaching

adulthood. As Martineau (2015) puts it, “we want leisure time even to be productive of leisure.” Taking this further, ‘leisure’ time with smart-technologies still involves producing and consuming on a global-economic scale. In Medieval Europe, clock-time was isolated to the aid of the commodification of labour, to organize and discipline labour (Martineau 2015). However, as Martineau (2015) hypothesizes, global-market time will colonize all other spheres of activity. The implications of this are temporal alienation and a cultural obsession with spending, and wasting and killing time, as I address in the following sections.

Though ICTs have enabled humans to communicate using multiple modalities and platforms, it is not without effect on how we think and engage with the world. With compulsive social media use, every ‘spare moment’ of time is dedicated to initiating extreme feelings, or ‘affect’, from object-relationships on social media. According to Veissière and Stendel (2018, 2), much current research focused on smartphone use associates it with “depression (Steers *et al.*, 2014; Andreassen *et al.*, 2016), materialism (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Twenge, 2017), and social anxiety (Billieux *et al.*, 2015; Emanuel *et al.*, 2015; Hussain *et al.*, 2017).” However, they argue, “popular accounts [...] miss the mark on a crucially important factor: it is not so much smartphones themselves that are addictive, but rather the *sociality* they afford” (Veissière and Stendel 2018, 2). Tanner’s case, therefore, represents the normalization of the loss of social time in consumer culture. It is hyper-social, albeit delivered in object time, wherein one feels neither commitment nor solitude (Martineau 2015; Veissière and Stendel 2018).

#### **5.2.4 Monitoring in Object Time**

The dynamic between object time and hyper-sociality is referred to by Veissière and Stendel (2018) as ‘hypernatural monitoring’ and can also be likened to Foucault’s panopticism. The panopticon is a building designed as a perfect prison: “at the periphery, an annular building; at the center, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring” (Foucault 1977, 200). Foucault uses this structure as a metaphor. The cells that comprise the inner part of the ring hold those who are being surveilled – prisoners – “they are like so many in cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible” (Foucault 1977, 200). Having inmates constantly

visible to the tower, yet individuated from one another, argues Foucault (1977, 200), “is a guarantee of order,” and likens the panopticon to social observation, normalization and dynamics of oppression within societies. Zuboff (1988; 2016) uses the panopticon as a metaphor in her critique of new technologies in the workplace and the staggering power of Google’s surveillance capitalism.

Veissière and Stendel (2018, 1) explain that social monitoring and the knowledge that one is being monitored is responsible for our expectations and actions day-to-day, claiming, “imagined other minds guide our expectations.” From this perspective, ‘culture,’ “can be conceptualized as patterned allocations of attention; that is, the practice of selectively paying attention, ascribing meaning, and guiding behavior to certain features of the world according to what we expect others to also expect and pay attention to” (Veissière and Stendel 2018, 3). While Zuboff as well as Veissière and Stendel see our subjectivities and privacy at stake in the age of surveillance capitalism, they also both understand that it is not the technologies themselves that are detrimental but the ideologies behind them, and how, write Veissière and Stendel (2018, 5) they harness “basic human proclivities for social monitoring and associative learning.” Through their cycling of sociality into short-term, addictive and detrimental processing rituals, social media pose a threat to our human intersubjectivities, stressing all the more that intentional and self-driven habits and practices be made to protect users from adopting harmful use patterns.

As outlined in Chapter Three, current psychological research shows strong correlations between autonomy and subjective well-being (Chirkov *et al.* 2011; Choudhury *et al.* 2013; Sheldon 2004; Veissière and Stendel 2018). Autonomy includes self-determination in one’s actions and self-concordance when choosing goals to pursue (Sheldon *et al.* 2004). According to Sheldon *et al.* (2004, 209), self-concordance is demonstrated by “people who express their authentic choices rather than with a sense that they are controlled by external forces over which they have little say.” To study this variable, Sheldon *et al.* (2004) catalogued their participants’ “perceived locus of causality” which asks, “does a person pursue goals with a sense that his/her situation is the source of the goals?” Their study demonstrates an equivalent concept of ‘owning’ one’s goals exists in the four cultures studied, and their results demonstrate that self-

concordance in each culture “was also predictive of every measure of [subjective well-being]” (Sheldon *et al.* 2004, 219). Perhaps those deeper cultural values that support a person over the course of years or a lifetime – values that are not fleeting, but worked on, substantiated and practiced over time, such as motivation and ambition – are more often neglected in life with ICTs. There can be no continuity of self-narrative, not because of the Internet’s networked platforms for identity construction, but because there is increasingly less concrete time to reflect on oneself. This will involve nurturing time that is not colonized by global market demands but time that is in accordance with the action that one’s own goals demand.

### **5.3 Independence Versus Individuality**

In modern society, the managed possession of consumer goods is individualizing and atomizing. It leads to distinction and differentiation, not to social solidarity. Thus, modern consumption is at odds with the inherently collective nature of consumption.

- George Ritzer (1998, 4).

The atomizing and individuating that capitalist modes within ICTs perpetuate is often described as promoting a certain type of individuality; however, the mass expression of consumerist ‘individuality’ creates a hegemonic state of its own. For one participant, Jamal, escaping this ‘collective nature of consumption’ means working not toward ‘individuality’ but independence. For him, independence boils down to how he chooses to utilize his time. The 19<sup>th</sup> century existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1987, 222) writes, “the unhappy one is the person who in one way or another has his ideal, the substance of his life, the plentitude of his consciousness, his essential nature, outside himself.” This perspective is important to remember in current consumerism, where ICTs increasingly enable us to ‘outsource’ work while their virtuality wraps and draws the essential around us, exterior, making us ever more vulnerable to a ‘will’ that is not our own.

Jamal has a strong religious faith which he uses to guide his maintenance of well-being. In his narrative, ‘individuality’ is often framed in a negative light while ‘independence’ is seen positively. Jamal came to my project after a professor recommended it to him after hearing I was looking for participants. Jamal is a 30-year-old, Kenyan-Canadian student at the University of Saskatchewan. He has never used

social media but the themes of this project resonated with him and so I decided to interview him for his informant-based perspective.

Jamal believes that “a long time ago people used to be more compassionate. Now people are more...individualistic life. They are more material [...] Those are things, at times, the media can pass to you. Like, those kinds of ideologies.” For Jamal, individualism challenges compassion. In the context of religion, Kierkegaard (2002) states, “the crowd is untruth.” Jesus is often portrayed as pulling one aside from the crowd to teach him. Yet, this is not the same as ‘individuality’. Popova (2014) explains that Kierkegaard’s philosophy “considers how our incapacity for quiet contemplation cuts us off from our true self and instead causes us to adopt by passive absorption the ideals of others.” If to be individuated is something that is done to one by mass-media and consumerism, then in order to nurture his ‘true self’ as opposed to absorbing manufactured ideals, Jamal says he instead practices his independence. But how does this independence differ from the individuation that is imposed by media? To return to the research of Sheldon *et al.* (2004, 209), this is a matter of self-concordance and “expressing authentic choices,” which involves autonomous decision-making.

In his narrative, Jamal puts into perspective the common denominator for all social media users – time. A large part of ‘independence’ for him means remaining accountable for his use of time. Though Jamal thinks using social media is too self-serving, ‘acting independently’ enables him to nurture a ‘dividual’ – his actual network of loved ones and colleagues. That is time spent “sharing your heart, versus superficial sharing,” he tells me. “Most religions teach good things,” he continues, “like being moderate. They don’t teach materiality.” Jamal directly links participating on social media to the material world of things and to consumerism. He tells me, “I use the media appropriately. Sometimes, if you cannot use it appropriately, avoid it, so that you don’t get trapped in that kind of culture.” I ask him what he does use the Internet for. He says he mainly uses the Internet to call his family in Kenya. By remaining independent from the consumerist culture that is perpetuated on social media, Jamal is able to more effectively use his time to stay in touch with his relatives, ensuring for him a better sense of well-being.



Time and time again, we see in the great works of literature and philosophy the struggle between the individual and the masses, both the virtues of selfishness and the virtues of selflessness. “We are facing a great danger today –” Eleanor Roosevelt (1960, 111) writes, still salient, “the loss of our individuality. It is besieged on all sides by pressures to conform: to a standardized way of living. The standards by which you live must be your own standards.” Furthermore, “when you adopt the standards and the values of someone else or a community or a pressure group, you surrender your own integrity. You become, to the extent of your surrender, less of a human being” (Roosevelt 1960, 111). In the same vein, Kierkegaard (1967, 367) writes, “the minority is generally formed by those who really have an opinion, while the strength of a majority is illusory, formed by the gangs who have no opinion.” Particularly relevant for consumerism, he adds, “[the majority] in the next instant (when it is evident that the minority is the stronger) assume its opinion while Truth again reverts to a new minority” (Kierkegaard 1967, 367). For Jamal, virtue is similarly enclosed within his definition of independence, saying, “independence is not like how much stuff you have at your disposal. Independence is how much are you by yourself. You know what I mean?” He asks me. I mishear him and ask, “how much you do?” To which he responds, “how much *are* you. Like, if someone has made an ideal woman, and you want to be like the ideal woman. You’re not yourself. You know? It’s like, how much is your mind independent from the colonization of others.” Being attentive to his own needs and goals without being swayed by external ideals or compulsions is important to Jamal and necessary for him to feel as though he is staying on track and doing his best. By nurturing his independence as opposed to aspiring toward individualism, Jamal fosters his own state of well-being and feels more able to contribute to that of others as well.

### **5.3.1 Spending Time and Killing Time**

The top four most frequently used words within all interviews and audio diaries of this thesis are: People, Time, Good and Want (see Fig. A.2 in Appendix A for Top Ten Words Diagram). Interestingly, as Jamal does not use social media, his interview contains the most mentions of ‘time’, at 75 occurrences. The range for most other participants goes from 46 mentions to 19 mentions of ‘time’. Perhaps Jamal is

more aware of the time that he feels would be wasted if he were to use the Internet for entertainment. The bottom two outliers are the interviews of Jo and Cindy, who seem, based on their approaches to social media, reasonably less concerned with time than the others, with just 12 and 7 mentions, respectively. At moments during interviews, the connotations of time and descriptions of processes of spending and wasting time seem like a dire struggle between independent forces rather than moments over which participants can choose to exert their own control. These excerpts demonstrate the power of hyper-consumerist object time and its ability to impact actual states of being in multiple day-to-day contexts.

Two years ago, when Laura began using a smartphone, she noticed that social media “becomes a lot more like a time-killer if you’re bored.” She tells me, “you know it’s like you’re standing somewhere and you’re like ‘oh I don’t want to look awkward, I’m just gonna scroll my phone kinda thing.” This impulse to ‘kill time’ and appear productive-in-a-certain-way is a common variable in many participants’ social media experiences. Jacob, who considers Facebook primarily a marketing tool, describes he uses “the marketing tool side 30% of the time...80% of the usefulness I get from Facebook is from that 30%,” he laughs. I tell him, “that’s a good way of putting it. So that means the majority of the time...” “...I spend is wasted! Or it’s really inefficient,” he finishes my sentence. The state of boredom plays a key role in perpetuating the necessity of ‘wasting time’. Jacob says about Tinder that it is “just some mindless thing you do,” as if the possibility of scoring a date with someone, which is the supposed purpose of Tinder, is just a minor detail underlying the habitual scrolling, which serves the real purpose of Tinder, on one end, satisfying one’s boredom.

Commodified object time is only valuable when it is ‘spent’, ‘killed’ or ‘wasted’ – that is, when it solves the problem of boredom or its passage is ignored altogether, which is perhaps itself a display of individualistic luxury. Jacob says that, on a recent trip to Mexico, “I found myself during the day, when I was bored because I didn’t have Facebook, I’d be browsing Tinder. It’s like this autopilot thing with your brain instinct. It’s like, who’s making all those decisions? It’s distraction, triggering some weird part of our brain. It’s like the Achilles heel of your brain.” Similarly, when Laura sees people using smartphones

in public, she thinks it's an unsettling mass phenomenon. She tells me, "they always have to—like, you always have to appear like you're doing something. Like you always gotta be looking at your phone and it's constant." She adds, "maybe's it's not that different from the past, but it feels like people are just more secluded into that, that world." The prioritization to 'appear like you're doing something' as opposed to doing something in actuality, points to the increasing pressure individuals are under with ICTs, whose existence tells them that 'there is so much to do, so little time' and that one must squeeze 'productivity' into each spare moment, even if it is only for appearances, and that ICTs will enable one to do so.

Friedrich tells me, "I don't really say much [on Facebook] anymore. I hate spending time on that website and wasting time on that website because I know, I remember from the earlier days, how it can pull you in with all that. It's—the stuff on it never ends. You can scroll down it for eternity and it will never stop. You'll keep seeing more and more and more stuff to look at but none of it is worth looking at, so I hate wasting time on looking at all that." Yet, even while Friedrich acknowledges that Facebook "takes away time, from us," he also articulates that sometimes it's "for a good cause, to, learn about other people in good ways, communicate with them. Share something with them." However, "sometimes it's just a waste of time. For a lot of people. It wastes a lot of our time. Which, we could spend doing something else." He goes on, his tone of voice sounding almost pleading, "and, I hope that more of us keep that in mind. You can spend your time on something else. Facebook should not be a priority in your life." Friedrich feels that by guarding himself against the 'pull' of the website, he can better maintain positive time management, though it takes him an intentional and constant effort to balance the minor benefits social media provide him with the danger, for him, of feeling his time wasted.

The subjective amount of 'free time' social media users seem to have and feel compelled to 'waste' and 'kill' online stands in stark contrast to the overall feeling or worry that 'time is going by too fast' or that one doesn't 'have enough time' and therefore must rely on ICTs. Jamal, however, has no qualms about how he uses his time and feels as though he has a lot of time. He tells me, "when I'm off, I have a lot of time in my days. And I'm off Saturday, Sunday or if I'm working shift, I'm off five days. So you

have time to meet with people and see their life, how they live.” For Jamal, “seeing how people are doing” is great, but he cannot attain this through social media. “I see my time as my privilege,” he says, “I’m a student. When I’m not a student, I’m working for my family and when I’m not working, I spend time with my family. So, I don’t want to take a lot of time out of my important life to do what’s not important for me...just chatting to people.” Similarly, Laura values ‘seeing how people are doing’, but unlike Jamal, she uses Facebook to keep updated on how her friends and relatives are doing. She tells me, “I don’t think there’s a lot wrong with the way people use Facebook. I mean, the ads and stuff, but that’s not, like, people specifically, more companies...It’s just the timing with it,” she continues, “it’s constant for people now, [it’s] just not a good thing for society.” Her opinion seems to change tack once ‘timing’ is introduced, but still, Laura does not hold individuals accountable but ‘the ads’. She says, “I’m bad at it too –” staying off the phone – “but you know, I try to make a conscious effort [...] I’m not updating or adding to it a lot. I don’t really do that very often. Mostly just like what I said, if I’m bored, um, I just like scrolling through the feed, looking for whatever catches my eye.” For Laura, nothing is ‘wrong’ with the way people use Facebook and yet she considers it ‘bad’ for society; she tries to avoid it but embraces it when she’s bored.

The problem that faces well-being in surveillance capitalism is that, since the boom of the attention economy, boredom has been commodified. It is rewarded, as demonstrated in Laura’s statement. Individuals do not feel as though they should be held accountable for it and, yet, as Laura states, it requires a conscious effort *not* to compulsively use social media. Insofar as information needs a reader, encouraging boredom is ensuring a captive audience. For now, using Facebook only when she’s bored is slightly reassuring for Laura so long as she does not begin to feel bored more often. Being bored is no longer neutral, in fact it’s manufactured, posing the question, which came first, this desire to ‘kill time’ or social media?

Boredom and the ease of user experiences with ICTs creates an economic feedback loop: people have less to say because they’re bored, social media presents an extremely accessible option to ‘solve’ their

boredom and their consumption is further rewarded. For example, Tanner tells me he originally viewed the Internet as a resource for high school homework and reading the news. Of Facebook, he says, “it was more a way to connect to my friends and now it’s um, it’s a way to connect—it’s uh informa—uh, resourceful—it’s, it’s entertainment.” He tells me that he sees social media as an “escape.” “Especially [when] I’m watching TV,” he says, “and a commercial comes on: okay well, go on Facebook. It’s like an escape from—like, now, talking to my family, which isn’t beneficial at all, but um, an escape from reality...even though you’re still connected ‘cause you’re just on your phone.” Tanner says, “I’ve become more reliable [sic] on Facebook than I ever thought I would. It’s a good way to keep stress off your mind...even though you’ll still have it. Going on Facebook, you’re seeing what could be stress in other peoples’ lives. Going on Facebook if I’m stressed is just to get away from what’s stressing me. It’s not really hiding the fact that I have the stress.” When I ask him how Facebook has changed him, he responds, “I’ve changed as a person and Facebook has changed as a whole...there’s more to do—well, I wouldn’t say there’s more, I’d say there’s less to do on Facebook [...] It’s all shifted,” he says, “it was so much more difficult, even posting videos. Now, we just press a button on our phone and it just pops up.”

Uploading and communicating in this multi-modal way used to be a slower and perhaps more intentional experience. Now, the excess of so much information and the ease with which it is created and shared, makes social media experiences much more akin to passive entertainment.

Many participants attribute a ‘will’ to social media: “It wastes” our time, “it takes time away,” “it can pull you in.” The difference between metaphors of ‘killing time’ and ‘wasting time’ can be understood through a comparison to hunting. It’s the difference between killing to attain and use resources and killing only to waste the animal’s resources. While a hunted animal can pass you by and remain alive, however, time cannot. Therefore, ‘killing time’ and ‘wasting time’ both involve the death of a moment yet differ in their implications of the level of agency of the actor: either they act in the time that passes or they let time expire on its own without reaping its opportunities. The massive use of the phrase ‘killing time’ and the conviction with which speakers use it implies a level of violence. It’s the negation of ‘free time’, the

acceptance of the colonization of object time and a new manifestation of the spirit of capitalism – to exert control over the ever-receding subjectivity of ‘Nature’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Alternately, the complacency with which the term ‘wasting time’ is spoken and the contempt that it musters suggests a deeper type of violence, one committed against human subjectivities, that is essentially nihilistic.

### **5.3.2 Well-Being and Time Use**

While some participants are like Laura, aware of and concerned about compulsive and constant social media use in others, they nonetheless justify their own similar use of time, claiming that some time just warrants being filled with social media use. Older Millennials like Jo have understandings of well-being which align with their positive habits surrounding social media use, while most of the younger participants’ understandings of well-being seem to justify their patterns of social media use. Jo says that maintaining well-being means doing something that she likes “that is constructive. It doesn’t have to relate to working out necessarily, healthy habits can also happen on a wider social and environmental level.” As Jo is habit-orientated in her awareness of well-being, she can perhaps more easily discern the negative habits posed by constant social media use and practice avoiding them. Alternately, Natalie’s constant wonder and expectation to find cool and interesting things online is supported in a way by her understandings of well-being. She tells me, “a healthy person should have a healthy and active mind that is open for new discoveries and full of creativity.” On one hand, she describes a youthful and positive outlook on life, while on the other hand, it can easily include being open to the constant ‘discoveries’ that are made while she reads posts online.

Similarly, 18-year-old Sam describes physical well-being as “being active in any way throughout the day,” and emotional and mental well-being includes “connecting and feeling connected to the important people” in his life. A day full of well-being for him includes “texting your parents and posting pictures of you and your friends having fun.” During his audio diary, however, Sam expresses frustration over getting notifications about friends, at first seeming excited, saying, “Oh—actually, I do have a notification from Twitter, which says two of my friends favoured another person’s tweets.” He then starts to explain, “so I

get a notification that they did that so that I can go look at what they like, I guess...” Then, in a sinking tone he says, “I always look at them and I always realize they don’t ever, like, apply to me. And it’s, it’s,” he sighs, “it’s dumb.” Furthermore, regarding the ‘important people’ in his life, he seems unconvinced of the role that social media play to keep himself and them connected. “I used Facebook a bit to start with,” he tells me, “right now in my life, it’s just nice having all the people I’ve met and people I don’t—like, people I don’t talk to anymore...But, it’s just nice knowing that, if I *want* to I *could* reach out to them. And it’s kinda like having a collection of everyone that is, important...minus the people that are important that don’t have Facebook.” He tries to classify his use of social media in a way that fits his well-being framework, yet at each turn in his statement, he grapples with the reality of his experiences, and they do not easily fit into the narrative.

The striking commonality is that despite these participants’ understandings of well-being, their day-to-day practices include multiple small to large moments of social media use that interrupt those practices which would otherwise fit into their conceptions of well-being. Moreover, the more that surveillance capitalism influences the function of ICTs, the more unpracticed individuals become at ‘living-according-to-their-own-time’. The more colonized our temporal subjectivities become by these interruptions of object time, the more that those patterns will come to affect other spheres of action and, in turn, fuel the power of surveillance capitalism. This will inevitably lead to decreased levels of well-being, as individuals’ self-concordance drops.

## 5.4 Conclusion

The acceleration of the rate at which we encounter information is part of a larger development of globally-imposed, capitalist market time. Temporal normativity in consumerism has always perpetuated binary distinctions between the valued – productivity, punctuality and rationality – and the not-valued – unproductive, lazy and uncivilized. These terms have been and continue to be used to articulate colonial efforts (Martineau 2017). Martineau (2017) argues that while ICTs accelerate social change, the rapid introduction of ICTs also contributes to an increase in individuals’ “quantity of episodes of action and the

feeling of temporal loss,” or, the feeling of being “always out of time.” Since, as Lanier (2018) puts it, “there is no such thing as infinite attention,” this contributes to a normalization of multitasking and a “compression of the present” (Martineau 2017). The participants in this chapter demonstrate that fitting more into each moment “does not lead us to live more meaningful lives,” as Martineau (2017) says, but the opposite: we grow more alienated “from our own actions” and have “less time to think about them.” As we consent to the commodification of our subjectivities by using social media, we become increasingly abstracted from the substance of our lives (Zuboff 1988; Martineau 2017).

Although social media provide the means for individuals to explore their identity and nurture global relationships, the compulsive use of social media subjects users to targeted, individuating, isolating and addictive forces. These forces of surveillance capitalism built into social media change individuals’ behaviours in ways that not only oppose their understandings of well-being but reconfigure their expectations of what well-being entails. Consumer culture prompts users to view social media use through a lens that emphasizes ‘fun’, ‘friendship’ and ‘entertainment’. This chapter shows the extent to which younger Millennials believe their standards for well-being are being met, when really, the tacit aspects of their narratives reveal themes of emptiness and unsustainability and indicate that quality time is no longer leisure but, rather, ‘free time’ to be killed.



## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

Once it is recognised that capitalism is not the product of the march of freedom and progress, or of a quantitative growth of material wealth, or cultural and social sophistication, or ‘urban rationality’, or of the ‘autonomy’ of urban centers that were thus able to ‘free’ themselves from ‘fettering’ rural feudal social relations, but rather is the unintended result of a specific qualitative configuration of social relations, there remains no ground on which to base any argument implying some form of European predisposition to capitalism and modernity.

- Jonathan Martineau (2015, 88)

The path on which humanity now travels with new technologies sprung into existence centuries ago.

Though infinitely diverse and with no set initiation, this trajectory continues to define the now surveillance capitalism and consumer culture of the twenty-first century. As globalization is spurred on by new innovations of internet technologies, the pathologies and anxieties that accompany mass infrastructural and media change are becoming increasingly cross-cultural in scope. Studying well-being in a Canadian, consumer cultural environment may not only prove to be insightful for other medical anthropological issues in Canada, such as health education policy-making, but issues surrounding rapid technological change in other environments as well, for example, well-being with ICTs in non-democratic countries.

When asked about what well-being means to them, participants stress the value of being active as well as spending time outdoors, but above all, they value acceptance, inclusion and togetherness. Despite social media providing many participants with a sense of beneficial sociality, this research shows that social media can easily become more detrimental than beneficial to achieve such well-being. Throughout this research I ask, “what does well-being mean?” and conclude that, although sociality is crucial, so too is autonomy. Though new technologies increasingly redefine the boundaries of ‘the human’ and provide, some argue, more than enough sociality, human autonomy nonetheless prevails as one fundamental and neglected aspect of subjective well-being in consumer culture.

Being “constructive” and being “active in any way throughout the day” are understood amongst participants as markers of well-being, as is moving away from an efficiency-mindset by doing such things

as, for example, “walking to class instead of bussing.” In relation to Lock and Scheper-Hughes’ (1990, 7) conception of “the three bodies,” the vast socio-technological pressure in the body-politic – “referring to the regulation, surveillance and control of bodies (individual and collective)” – marks a pathological valuation of cultural efficiency at the cost of autonomy. The cultural strain on individual bodies to ‘become’ efficient, conform and seek the promised opportunities of surveillance capitalism, essentially guides individuals to participate-and-therefore-consent to exploitation. As this study mainly demonstrates the individual body and the body politic, which ICTs highlight as they both bring together and isolate, future medical anthropological research might focus on the social body as a mediating third path. How do social actors organize and communicate despite surveillance capitalism and in what ways are dissent being woven into practices?

Autonomy from and with social media is a complicated phenomenon because it does not necessarily require the non-use social media, while at the same time, there are massive economic incentives for SNSs to partake in the lawless prediction and regulation of user behaviour. Though expanding on the laws surrounding personal security and autonomy online is beyond the scope of this thesis, the current attention economy creates for most social media a ‘will’ that inherently makes it harder for users to end their social media use. Therefore, while social media can contribute to users’ well-being by providing a space for sociality, a crucial aspect of well-being, social media does not do nearly enough to encourage user autonomy from these technologies. This ultimately skews individuals’ perceptions and embodiments of well-being through temporal and subjective alienation, apathy and hyper-sociality.

## **6.1 Culture and Power**

In the interviews, the participants included stories about themselves as members of the consumer culture of surveillance capitalism. Subjectivities have always been both overtly and covertly exploited in capitalism, resulting in alienation and reification; essentially, novel subjective qualities always become commodified. With social media, the oft-covert commodification of subjectivities becomes explicit through the super-massive tracking and sale of data. Considering the plethora of ICTs that offer a service

to ‘make life easier’ though their real function is to collect data, autonomy is now something that is often foregone in exchange for this new ‘efficiency’.

Reducing sociality to social media and the categorization of subjectivities in surveillance capitalism is a cultural pattern that threatens to become ever-more concrete and to pan out on a global stage. As put by Lock (2001:479), medical anthropology has long stood to include “episodes of distress and sickness” in analytical frameworks and to conceive of these “as vehicles for understanding constellations of associated knowledge and practices.” The ethnographic cases of this thesis demonstrate that personhood, gender, affect, kinship and embodied well-being all encircle social media use and co-create such constellations of knowledge and practice. In addressing the cultural repercussions of distress and addiction involved in the extraction and mining of subjectivities over social media, future studies might focus on the relationality between surveillance capitalism on social media and the social as well as individual bodies.

Martin’s (2000) conception of the ‘shifting of the gendered poles’ also opens many avenues of inquiry regarding gender, globalism and the body politic with surveillance capitalism. Where once efficiency equated progress and was associated with the masculine, efficiency now associates with hyper-socialities. When hyper-socialities involve multi-tasking and lateral communications, the linear and hierarchical concept of ‘progress’ begins to fade from efficiency concepts, as do the previously masculine associations. As the intersubjectivities of sociality are continuously being manipulated and extracted in surveillance capitalism, the consequences of such enacted sociality ultimately become ‘rational’, as in, they are brought into a state of calculation and control. Future research in critical medical anthropology therefore might question the state of masculinities and femininities in surveillance capitalism. How is ‘the feminine’, once associated with ‘Nature’, becoming the rational subject while ‘the masculine’ becomes the manic or passionate object? How are conceptions of the multiple and the singular interposing with gender concepts with the Information Age and its corresponding transnationalism?

Addictive social media use patterns occur amongst users which keep them online longer, albeit feeling strangely alienated and without a sense of time. Individuals whose actions are more autonomous from

surveillance capitalism are better equipped to resist dependence upon the false comforts that seem to emanate from social media. More awareness on the metrics of social media and practice in time management may entrench positive habits and choices that will aid in feeling closer to friends. For example, handwriting a letter can be a practice in focus that serves to expand a moment in time which is otherwise compressed and accelerated by ICTs, while also strengthening sociality in a creative and personal way (Duclos *et al.* 2017). Furthermore, current neuroscientific research shows that a practice of language in its long, linear written form as opposed to fragmented, brief and multilayered forms, can positively affect well-being due to its unique neural, semiotic and embodied properties which help foster empathy (Wolf 2018). Ultimately, however, Facebook and Google and their corresponding modes of economy must be held accountable and pressured to change to value actual user consent.

Not all ICTs that are marketed as ‘convenient’ or ‘efficient’ are necessarily as described. The critical thinking presented by Jo when she questioned who gains from the ‘efficiency’ of social media is essential in consumer culture. If one can speak to one’s distant relatives more expediently over Facebook, but are simultaneously bombarded by advertisements which initiate an unplanned, 35-minute virtual shopping trip, then, one must ask, ‘would I not feel better for longer if, instead, I wrote an email or took the time to write a letter?’ The subjectivities that are lost when choosing a more ‘efficient’ route of communicating are also those which can strengthen the practice of sociality and autonomy.

Future research in medical anthropology might focus on the role that traditional or analog communication technologies play in the maintenance of subjective well-being and why traditional communications are valued cross-culturally. Indeed, even taking a short break from social media can help foster a long-term practice that strengthens focus, empathy and autonomy. As seen in Cindy’s case, social media can also help one organize these practices. However, this research demonstrates that current perceptions of well-being are changing to justify even more dependence on social media.

By taking time outside of ‘object time’, one can resist the adverse affects of subjective and temporal commodification and work toward the very sociality and autonomy promised by ICTs. Although

participants describe their social media experiences as providing them with a sense of sociality and self-satisfaction, participants also demonstrate that depressive feelings, anxiety, self-doubt and feelings of low self-worth accompany the habitual use of social media. Participant understandings of well-being involve giving time to oneself as well as to leisure and ‘social time’, yet, for most participants, those things are not found over social media. The relationship between embodiments of well-being, according to participants, and their conceptions of well-being is also strained. Further, the discord between actual embodiments of participants’ social media use and the participants’ belief that these patterns fit their well-being paradigms creates a strained and thin sense of denial that is demonstrated by fissures and contradictions in participant narratives. Emerging linguistic confluences of meaning, for example, between ‘leisure’ and ‘entertainment’ or ‘friendship’ and ‘consumption’, also indicate the normalization of dependence on social media and further stretch conceptions of well-being to include habitual social media use.

## **6.2 An Organic Future**

The ‘compression of the present moment’ or the ‘acceleration of temporalities’ are some ways that the perception of time has been described with ICTs (Haraway 1991; Duclos *et al.* 2017; Farías 2017). As information is shortened and compressed at hyper-speeds for our consumption, so too do humans ‘shorten’ and ‘compress’ temporal moments which, in turn, alter what are otherwise less technologically-augmented subjectivities. Put colloquially, ‘you are what you eat’. The value placed in consumer culture on quantifying the ‘quality of life’ is ultimately detrimental for well-being. Considering this, future medical anthropological research on narratives of smartphone addiction and habitual social media use can provide needed insight into the study of anxiety and depression in consumer culture. In the following section, I discuss current and possible areas for medical anthropological research, including studies of time, space and well-being that are gaining traction in academia, and expand upon possible solutions for a better practice of autonomy, critical thinking and time management in consumer culture, areas where medical anthropological insight is greatly needed.

During the rise of digital technologies in the workplace, Zuboff (1988, 83-84), in her ethnography, *In the Age of the Smart Machine*, asks readers to imagine her vision of the future:

Organizational members become ever more dependent, docile, and secretly cynical. As more tasks must be accomplished through the medium of information technology, (I call this ‘computer-mediated work’), the sentient body loses its salience as a source of knowledge, resulting in profound disorientation and loss of meaning.

While ICTs allow us to access never-ending drifts of algorithmically-differentiated information, we are forced to reconsider our boundaries – what is ‘mine’ and who is ‘I’. Questions of not just well-being but *being* – the ‘there’-ness of a place, the realness of virtuality – are brought into light by the persistence of social media and a ‘computer-mediated’ reality. Perhaps the loss of meaning experienced in post-postmodern consumerism can in part be attributed to such alienation and reification of our intelligent biology, our subjective feelings and our intersubjective intuitions.

The ‘intelligence’ of social media interfaces, though massively innovative, reduce the individual human to an economic husk whose subjectivities are mined. Zuboff (1988, 82) writes of a conversation she has with millworkers, wherein the attributes of future humans are discussed:

the worker of the future would need an “extremely flexible personality” so that he or she would not be “mentally affected” by the velocity of change. They anticipated that workers would need a great deal of education and training in order to “breed flexibility.” “We find it all to be a great stress,” they said, “but it won’t be that way for the new flexible people.”

The new flexibility of which they speak, harkened on by neuroscientific research and the advent of fMRI machines, resides in Millennials who meandered through digital virtuality at length whilst coming of age. This virtual flexibility, however, comes at a price and evidence suggests that the critical thinking and empathy garnered from book-reading, processing long-form narrative and communicating face-to-face dwindle as they go unpracticed (Wolf 2018).

Since speed and efficiency are so rewarded in consumer culture, yet conceptions of well-being include slowing down and quality time, participants struggle to strike a balance. For neuroscientist and author Maryanne Wolf (2018), the greatest issue surrounding social media comes down to the allocation of enough time to “deep read.” At a presentation, Wolf argues that individuals today must develop the

“‘biliterate’ ability to process both the speed of the digital reading environment and to still be able to benefit from and appreciate the effects of deep reading” (Harmon 2018). Wolf (2018) claims deep reading is a way to foster those subjectivities which social media diminish, and she links our “ability to perceive beauty” and to “understand the viewpoints and feelings of others” to the focus and empathetic capacity humans acquire specifically from reading books (Harmon 2018). Amid this rapid technological change, it is medical anthropology’s responsibility to utilize our position amongst psychology, neuroscience, health policy and broad cultural analyses to conceive of a wholistic approach to study social media, ICTs and well-being.

Social media have proven themselves a useful tool for objectively manifesting an already-virtual sociality. Individuals must apply their own goal-setting and autonomous skills to these tools, otherwise, the reflexivity and passivity of social media isolate users and introduce feelings of inadequacy and anxiety, creating further strain between users’ embodiments and perceptions of well-being. It is not only the pervasion of ‘smart’ technologies in society that make clear these trends. The implications of exploited boredom and loneliness are now just more apparent than ever. In a recording from the late 1970s, film director Andrei Tarkovsky (2012) speaks to the importance of solitude when he says,

One of the faults of young people today is that they try to come together around events that are noisy, almost aggressive at times. This desire to be together in order to not feel alone is an unfortunate symptom, in my opinion. Every person needs to learn from childhood how to spend time with oneself. That doesn’t mean he should be lonely, but that he shouldn’t grow bored with himself because people who grow bored in their own company seem to me in danger, from a self-esteem point of view.

The solitary neurological processes which online consumerism targets, such as the dopaminergic response and one’s sustained unsatisfactory anticipation in hyper-social states, perpetuate the constant habitual use of social media. As social media use becomes even more habitual, users tell themselves comforting narratives, such as to the theme of ‘I use Facebook to see how my friends are doing’. Even though these participants are aware that just a sliver of their attention on social media is directed at friends and perhaps just a fraction of that is required in real time, they feel powerless to curb their habituated actions that they

often tacitly feel to be meaningless. The changes in the commonplace metaphors presented in this thesis are evidence that these narrative patterns are panning out on a cultural scale, and function to enable and pre-emptively justify further social media use. Ultimately, these conflicting and misrepresentative shared narratives are redefining well-being criteria and allowing into its scope detrimental and addictive practices.

The importance of self-concordance, the creation of one's own goals over time, cannot be understated. At this point, I return to Trevor's story of befriending a fellow gamer from Australia while Trevor himself lived in Saskatoon. Trevor and his friend Matt started speaking at the respective ages of 12 and 10 when they met each other online in the Xbox game, Halo. They communicated through headsets while gaming and, eventually, Trevor was introduced to Matt's broader circle of friends, also within the game. The two boys began confiding in each other about major life events, such as the death of Trevor's aunt or Matt's breakup with his girlfriend. When they first talked about meeting each other several years ago, Trevor's parents were slightly concerned. Matt's parents, however, who had met through the Internet themselves, were not as worried. Both families decided the boys could meet when Trevor finished high school and turned 18. This past summer, Trevor traveled to visit Matt and his family at their home in Adelaide for three and a half weeks and the two were able to solidify the long-term friendship they had fostered virtually over the past six years.

Trevor's autonomy and the strength of his social bonds opened his world. His confidence and ability to use these technologies for his own goals allowed him to dodge the coercive effects of attention-seeking interfaces. Lisa, on the other hand, believes in the authenticity of her online sociality, yet is aware of the reflexive discomfort that her social media use brings her. She reacts to it critically and spirals into anxiety, yet this fuels her further reliance upon using social media for comfort. In this way, the consumerism of the Internet incentivizes distraction and makes it very hard for social media users to step back and consider the formation of detrimental patterns of use. Colonizing the time of social media users to the economic



agendas of object time thus corrupts individuals' opportunities for self-concordance, autonomy and, therefore, well-being.

While our existence with technologies is and often has been portrayed as a cyborgian, techno-mediated dystopia such as those in the films *Solaris* (1972), *Gattaca* (1997) and *The Island* (2005) and the recent television show *Black Mirror* (2011-Present), current research in anthropology and design conceive of a future with technologies that is fluid and harmonious. Themes in popular depictions include realizing that the reality in which one lives is in fact an ominous and intelligent system; foreboding technologies that enable and enforce a standard of ability that obscures distinctions between 'natural' and 'unnatural'; and reaching, with the help of technologies, the frontier of the human spirit, only to face an unrelenting and incomprehensible deterioration of those taken-for-granted boundaries. These stirring themes in fiction see a humanity that has forsaken its subjective nature. However, new anthropological studies on speed, electricity and design, all inextricably linked to our endless endeavor to 'progress' and differentiate ourselves from 'Nature', offer new perspectives on the nature of progress, the technologies we use, and how they are helping us to merge our perceptions of well-being with our embodied states to realize a more integrated existence.

The isolating, false expectations of a satisfying sociality on social media hold the attention of users through hope only to alienate them from the embodiment of their own subjectivities. For example, 'discarded' subjectivities of 'time spent online' go on to inform psychographic research – statistical studies of massive datasets on personality types. These are exploited by consulting companies such as the now-defunct Cambridge Analytica, who were consulted for US President Trump's 2016 general election campaign to manipulate the 'information diet' of Facebook users and, in turn, their politics. This constitutes just one intersection of cybersecurity, identity, surveillance capitalism and national defence – a growing field of its own which will require exponentially more attention and resources in coming years. However, beyond the dark and detrimental relationships one can have with technologies and the lawlessness of surveillance capitalism, there are endless possibilities for innovation.

Activism in all shapes and forms, from politics to personal fitness, has never had so much visibility as it does today. In cultural anthropology, Duclos (2017, 2) *et al.* write, “fast-paced life comes with relentless involvements that, while not totally exhausting life, may be wearing it out and pushing it to the limit: on the verge of depression.” ‘Speed’ is not just an individual choice but a necessity that permeates major cultural arenas. To convey this, Duclos (2017, 8) *et al.* describe a trade war that led to the investment of “tremendous amounts of money” in the digging of tunnels “through the rock of the Allegheny Mountains to lay fiber-optic cable between New York and Chicago to shave a few milliseconds in transmission latency.” They address “the rise of high-frequency trading (HFT) within the financial sector. Roughly put,” write Duclos (2017, 7) *et al.*, “HFT is a type of algorithmic trading characterized by the high speeds of its operations,” wherein algorithms are able to identify “good deals and trends more than a million times faster than a human investor can blink.” The catastrophic stock market plunges and recoveries marked by HFT include that of “May 6, 2010 [, when] the Dow Jones stock index lost about 9 percent (\$862 billion) of its value within minutes” (Duclos *et al.* 2017, 7). Furthermore, ICTs not only connect humans but connect and operate amongst themselves, pushing our once-human transactions into a space and time where humans simply cannot go. Operating “in tenths and hundredths of a second,” write Duclos (2017, 7) *et al.*, these economies are “well beyond human response time and the grasp of consciousness.” Indeed, the world as perceived through the machinic lens of object speed “gives the obdurate physical reality of space a renewed prominence, and a physical constraint – the speed of light – is of growing importance” (MacKenzie *et al.* 2012, 281). Therefore, the increasing and inhuman speed demanded by surveillance capitalism calls for a technologically proficient medical anthropology as intersubjectivities are increasingly immersed, objectified and concealed within neoliberal design.

The extent of connectivity aided by the speed of today’s digital infrastructure has led many to argue that our relations, instead of being defined by hierarchies, are spreading out or ‘flattening’. This is attributed to the sheer number of avenues opened by the Internet, which leads to an increase in the breadth of resources of a business or individual, compelling their operations to scan the surfaces, faster than ever

before. ‘Flattening’ or “Wal-marting,” as Donald (2001) calls it, has strong ties to the economic incentivization of capitalism, wherein corporations do more things at a cheaper cost rather than less things but at a higher level of quality (Baudrillard 1998). This is not only seen in modes of production and global finance, but in areas of care, such as psychiatry, which increasingly compound the effects of reified and neglected subjectivities (Donald 2001),

In his recent book *Flatness*, Higman (2017) alludes to how flatness, both figurative and literal, has been relatively overlooked in anthropology. As indicated in Chapter Four, the appreciation of flatness is engrained in our very biology – it is innate to orient ourselves perpendicular to the ground and we can tell when what we are treading upon is not flat. Since flatness is “rare in nature,” Higman (2017, 16) writes, “the idea of a plane presents a conceptual invention, raising fundamental questions about the nature of space, the very fact of landscape and its relationship to nature and culture.” However, even flatness – this landmark of human living – is proving not to be the most effective solution for today’s high demands of technological functioning and human well-being.

Artificially intelligent software now exists that helps designers build stronger and more efficient versions of manufactured components (Conti 2017). Some examples include aircraft cabin partitions, technological hardware, such as drones and medical equipment and devices. The software is given certain parameters within which it is asked to ‘solve’ design problems, then it produces digital blueprints for *all* viable options on its screen. “I’ll give you an example,” says Conti (2017) at TED Conference,

In the case of this aerial drone chassis, all you would need to do is tell [the software] something like, it has four propellers, you want it to be as lightweight as possible and you need it to be aerodynamically efficient [...] What the computer does is it explores the entire solution space. Every single possibility that solves and meets your criteria. Millions of them. It takes big computers to do this. But it comes back to us with designs that we, by ourselves, never could have imagined.

Far from the flat, geometric perfection with which humans have long distinguished themselves, the designs that this software produce can be likened only to structures that evolution itself has created over millennia: plane partitions that look like massive root structures, drone bodies that resemble flying-

squirrel pelvic bones. To be clear, this software does not have access to external images, but rather, it creates. What Conti (2017) calls “an intuitive AI” – it is *so effective* at solving form-to-function problems that, the forms which it generates, and the naturally selected forms of life, appear to be one in the same. For Conti (2017), what is most important for humanity’s future and the well-being of future humans is “amplifying our cognitive abilities, so we can imagine and design things that were simply out of our reach as plain old un-augmented humans.” This merging of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’, though once thought to be taking humans ever further from an organic world, may in fact have the potential to do the opposite. Future areas of research for medical anthropology must include artificial intelligence to contribute to the intersubjective and grassroots aspects of tech-innovation and to conceive of a future of benevolent, democratized technologies with the capacity to integrate human affect and the non-human in ways we have yet to imagine.

It is easy to fall back into fictional depictions of a future with technology, wherein humans seem to lose the subjectivities which give our lives meaning. While many take Turkle’s (2011, 6) stance that “we are celebrating an emotional dumbing-down, a willful turning away from the complexities of human partnership,” the participants in this thesis prove quite the contrary: that any “turning away” is neither “willful” nor a turning away from human partnership. Social media are like a double-edged sword – it can be “a good tool,” to quote Jo. As is such with any tool, to not harm oneself with it but rather be able to use it, one must first be informed on its proper use. This means at least an accurate, basic understanding of how it’s made – the qualities with which it’s built and are implicit to its form – and therefore, a better understanding of that to which it must be applied.

The ‘velocity of change’ that individuals face today is a growing topic in cultural anthropology (Duclos *et al.* 2017; Farías 2016). According to Farías (2017), another step that individuals can take to resist object time in consumerism is a slowing down of their decision-making to foster better faith in their subjectivities and even an appreciation of solitude. A challenge of ‘slowing down’ in consumerism, however, is that it opens-up uncertainties and individuals therefore must have more confidence in their

intuitive selves. Farías (2017, 36), for example, offers a critical look at the “radical uncertainties deriving from the entanglement of humans and non-humans” and seeks to assess when a slowing down of decision-making is helpful. Furthermore, new research is shedding light on such anthropological concepts as the intertwining and situatedness of human subjectivities and non-human worlds.

Research in psychology of cognition has turned to the study of culture’s level of integration within humans and concludes what anthropology has long argued, that culture is an integrated mix of virtual configurations of semiotic processes as well as shared socio-political states and behaviours (Hutto *et al.* 2018). Hutto *et al.*’s (2018, 3) research looks through the lens of what they call “radical enactivism” and argues, “human cognition is not only shaped but utterly *permeated* by the patterned practices in which it partakes and the socio-cultural contexts within which those practices grow and develop.” Such a thesis is not only substantiated in psychology but, as their article indicates, the neuroscientific technologies that have enlightened us to the brain have enabled philosophy, sociology and other humanities to support the medical anthropological notion that individuals, including their brains, are situated in their cultural contexts and that language and culture, integrated in our biology, define all aspects of well-being and affect.

Now, more than ever, anthropology needs to embrace subjective ethnography and interdisciplinary research to further explore the avenues that such technologies have opened. Collecting participant narratives on well-being and ICTs in the Information Age can accomplish what Kleinman and Fitz-Henry (2007, 1) call a study on the “experiential basis of subjectivity.” Kleinman and Fitz-Henry (2007, 63) explore several ethnographies where “the social and the subjective interpenetrate,” and write that “our subjectivities do not merely shift from one epoch (or cultural setting) to another,” but rather, “the templates that scientists, psychologists, anthropologists, and other ‘experts’ use to think about the processes that define subjectivity—memory, repression, dissociation, and so on—are themselves socially produced historical constructs.” In medical anthropology, Joao Biehl, Byron Good and Arthur Kleinman’s (2007) edited collection of ethnographic investigations, *Subjectivities*, offers several examples of how

experiential approaches to the study of resources and the socio-politics of infrastructure can open new pathways in medical anthropological practice and theory. Furthermore, this area in medical anthropology seems poised to focus on consumer cultural, neoliberal issues in North America, such as, social media's role in the perpetuation of resistance to healthcare practices like vaccinations, the cultural comorbidity of detrimental social media use amongst at-risk populations, the necessity of digital virtuality for healthcare systems, and the role that social media play amongst deportees and displaced peoples, to name a few. However, medical anthropological studies like these have yet to be done.

As both human and non-human intelligences operate at the core of consumer culture, it brings to mind a time at the turn of the Industrial Revolution. The so-called divide between 'Nature' and culture which became so problematic then is no wider than that between the virtual and the real, and we must learn from our experiences with the former and the history of scientific thought that followed. Autonomy, self-concordance and an aptitude for moving between environments efficiently and respectfully for safe passage through chaos has been valued by humans since time immemorial. Ultimately, we are living through a technological revolution. As it was in the last revolution, 'Nature' has fallen prey, first to being 'understood', then dominated, then controlled. This time, however, that which does the 'understanding' is inhuman and the 'Nature' is what lies at the core of us.

## APPENDIX A

### FIGURES

**Figure A.1 All Nodes Cluster Diagram**

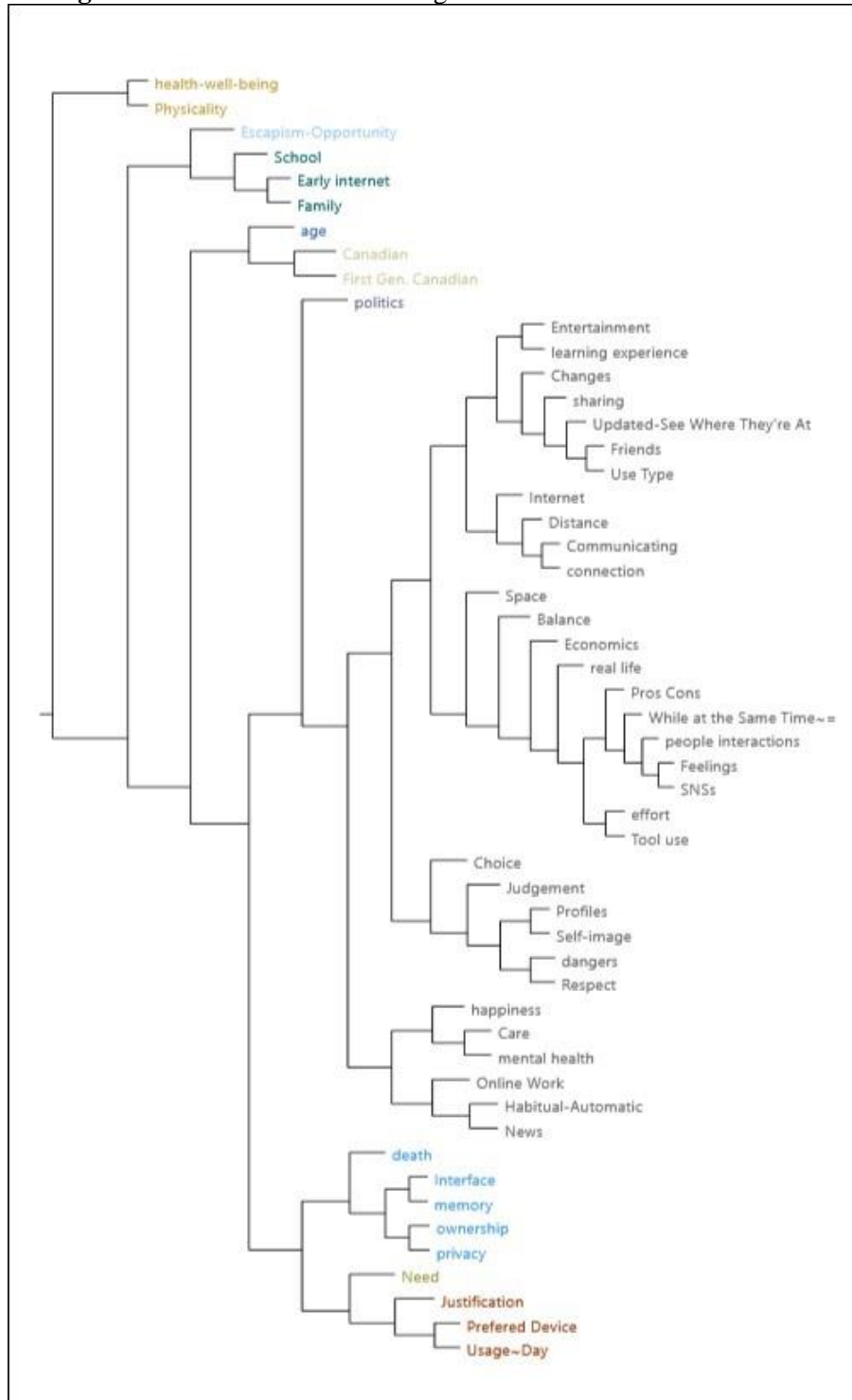


Figure A.2 Top Ten Words Diagram

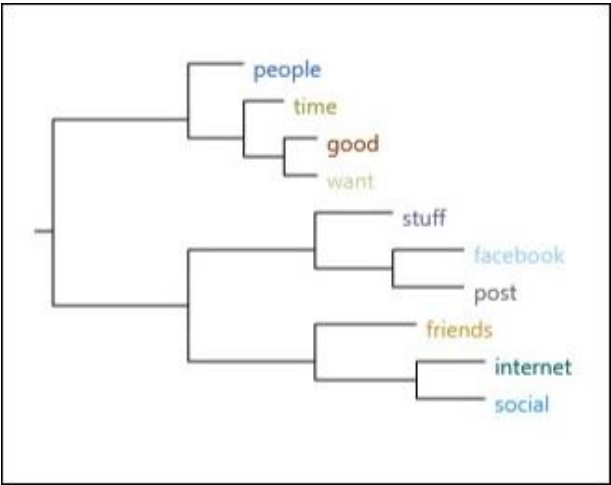
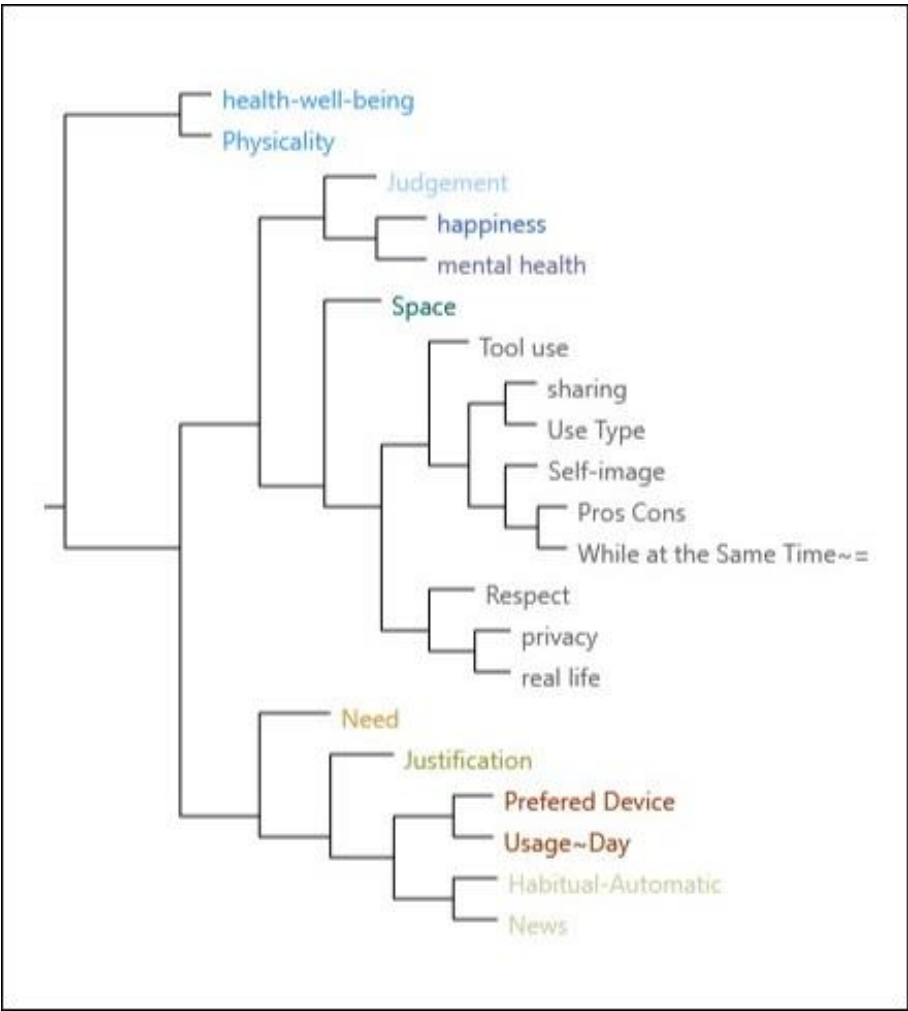


Figure A.3 Word Similarity Diagram





APPENDIX B  
RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL



UNIVERSITY OF  
SASKATCHEWAN

Behavioural Research Ethics

***Certificate of Approval***

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR  
Sadeq Rahimi

DEPARTMENT  
Archaeology & Anthropology

BEH#  
15-193

INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CONDUCTED  
Saskatoon  
Saskatchewan, Canada

STUDENT RESEARCHER(S)  
Kathleen Hutton

FUNDER(S)  
INTERNALLY FUNDED

TITLE  
Narratives of the Image: Facebook, Identity and Well-being at a Canadian University

ORIGINAL REVIEW DATE  
10-Jul-2015

APPROVAL ON  
13-Aug-2015

APPROVAL OF:  
Application for Behavioural Research  
Ethics Review  
Recruitment Poster/Recruitment Letter  
Participant Consent Form  
Interview Guide

EXPIRY DATE  
12-Aug-2016

Full Board Meeting ☐

Delegated Review ☒

**CERTIFICATION**

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

**ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS**

In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month prior to the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: <http://research.usask.ca/for-researchers/ethics/index.php>

  
Scott Tunison, Vice-Chair  
University of Saskatchewan  
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

Please send all correspondence to:

Research Ethics Office  
University of Saskatchewan  
Box 5000 RPO University, 1602-110 Gymnasium Place  
Saskatoon SK S7N 4J8  
Telephone: (306) 966-2975 Fax: (306) 966-2060

## APPENDIX C INTERVIEW GUIDE

Since this study requires qualitative, narrative data, the interview questions will be largely open-ended to give the participants opportunity to tell stories about their experiences and feelings. Questions and conversation will include the following:

### **More Categorical**

- When did you first start using the internet?
  - Can you describe the setting of your earliest internet experiences?
  - Where was the computer in the household?
  - What kinds of activities did you do online?
  - What kind of family dynamics surrounded who gets to use the internet, or the computer, if any?
- What is your cultural background?
  - Have you always lived in Canada? For how long?
  - How old are you?
- Around what point – elementary, high school, university – did you start using social networking sites?
  - What site or sites did you use then?
  - How have your experiences with social networking sites changed over the years, if at all?
- Do you go on Facebook every day?
  - What device do you usually use to access Facebook – phone, computer?
  - Does the device you use to go online affect your online participation or behaviours? Why do you think that is?
- Do you go on Facebook at a certain time of day or is your time online broken up throughout the day?
  - How long do you spend on one SNS at a time?
  - What do you do for most of this time?

### **More Open**

- Growing up, what did the internet mean to you?
- Describe the feelings you associate with signing in to Facebook?
- Tell me about your regular Facebook activity.
- How do you gauge whether a photo becomes a profile picture?
- Tell me about how most people interact over Facebook.
- How would people be without Facebook?

Themes that may also be discussed in the interview surround identity, self-presentation, friendship, family, privacy, consumption and advertising/advertisements.

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